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蟲と眼球と殺菌消毒
MF文庫J

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蟲と眼球と殺菌消毒

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Open: Clock of Endless Nights

About this… She was an intriguing girl. Should we say that an aura of discord is condensed upon her, or that she resembled the part that spells ‘trouble’ when people say the phrase ‘let’s stir up some trouble’? She was about ten years old, or perhaps a bit older, and looked as if she was in elementary school.

She seemed innocent and spoke in a clear voice, how should one describe it…? — It was as though her entire self radiated a joyful light, like any other grade-schooler.

That's right, she was a grade-schooler.

A grade-schooler missing her two arms.

It was not fate or anything like that.

"Long time no see."

It was just a coincidence, an illfated coincidence.

"It's been two years! Do you remember me, Rinne?"

They were at the small intersection of the merry market street in a small town.

A girl called out at Usagawa Rinne, who studied at Kannonsakazaki Private High School, as she left the school.

The girl had perfectly straight long black hair and eyes that shone with determination. Thick, round eyebrows stood above her eyes.

She wore Kannonsakazaki's school uniform.

"I'm Katō Katsumi, don't you remember me…? You should remember me, right?"

She smiled with some faint loneliness as the neon light reflected off her skin.

It was in the evening, and the sun was setting. Rinne had finished the cleaning duty that was pushed onto her after everyone else left since she lost a bet, and hurried home because it was late.

A piercing wind came out of the early winter's cold air.

The girl who called herself Katsumi moved over, her beautiful hair and body seemingly flowing in the darkness.

"Katsumi?"

That was a familiar name that had been carved into her heart.

Since the person in front of her was so much more beautiful than Rinne remembered, she didn't recognize her at first. However, she did not forget. How could she forget?!

“Do you remember?”

“Eh…”

She was Rinne’s friend in middle school, and the only friend willing to stay by her side.

Of course, that may have simply been Rinne’s wishful thinking, but whenever she thought of her painful time in middle school, she recalled the endless support Katsumi had provided to her.

But Rinne didn’t have the courage to go see her.

Middle school — that was the time when she was fed up with absolutely everything, breathing included. She constantly shut herself in her room, believing that she didn’t have a place in her house or at school. It was when she attempted suicide.

At that time, Rinne repeatedly pushed Katsumi away when she tried to approach her. “Katsumi, do we go to the same school?”

“Mmm, it seems so.” Katsumi replied, smiling all the while.

“You’re really famous in this school, though. I’ve known that you are here for a pretty long time, but I didn’t have an opportunity to talk to you before.”

Rinne’s expression showed a slight uncertainty as she apologetically bowed her head towards Katsumi.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? For what? You didn’t exactly do anything wrong in middle school. Everyone wants to avoid other people from time to time, actually…”

Saying this, Katsumi pointed at a coffee shop on the side of the road.

“Then, wanna sit down and talk for a while? Are you free?”

“Eh? Ah, OK!”

Rinne nodded out of reflex, and followed Katsumi in.

The coffee shop’s pretty hostess greeted the customers with a formal smile.

Soft, sweet music flowed through the coffee shop. Whether it was due to the late hour, or it was always this way, the store had no customers.

Katsumi probably came here often, as she smoothly ordered two cups of coffee while sitting down on a chair.

Then she smiled slightly as she said to Rinne, who was standing there unsure of what to do, “You can sit down. This part of you never changes…”

“What part?”

“The fact that you hold back too much at a lot of things, most of all in your own happiness.”

Saying these words, which Rinne couldn’t really understand, Katsumi beckoned at Rinne. *No change. She didn’t change at all*.

In eighth grade, Rinne pushed this friend away, and even Katsumi eventually gave up. The year after, when they bumped into each other in the hallway, Katsumi pretended not to notice her.

“Rinne, I - wanted to apologize to you all this time.”

Katsumi still showed that lonely smile.

Rinne sat on the chair and widened her eyes in surprise.

“Eh?”

“I promised to always be good friends with you, but we drifted apart. I’ve felt so regretful over that, and I want to apologize.”

Katsumi remorsefully bowed her head as she apologized.

Rinne didn’t know what to do, and only waved her hands, denying it with embarrassment.

“No way. The one who should apologize… is me, Katsumi. It was me who - hated everything, rejecting and drifting apart from everyone else and shutting myself in my room. You tried to get close to me, even so…”

“Not taking it all the way to the end is meaningless. But, thanks.”

“Clack”, the hostess silently set down the coffee. Katsumi picked

one up and raised it to Rinne.

“Then, let’s be friends again. Let’s share the blame. I was wrong, and you were wrong too. We both said sorry, and we forgave each other, so let’s call it even.”

Rinne felt as though the scar in her heart gradually started to disappear.

As expected, Katsumi was still Katsumi, the Katsumi that Rinne liked, this girl who promised to “always be good friends” with her during middle school. Even though she wasn’t particularly special and didn’t attract people immediately, her heart was gentler than anyone else. Rinne’s eyes failed to hold their tears in, and she lowered her head to hide this.

“Ah.”

“Then, cheers! Saying this is pretty weird, but whatever.”

“Clack”, the two lightly tapped their cups together. Then they chatted about all sorts of topics, all of which would be considered trivial, as if they wanted to fill up the gap between the past and present. To talk like this with Katsumi had once been Rinne’s joy back in middle school. She was abandoned by her mother, beaten by her father, and still dragged her tired heart to school to be picked on by other students over her family situation.

And yet, Katsumi was still willing to be with her.

She was a friend more important than almost anyone else.

“Katsumi”, with words containing all of her heart’s feelings, Rinne said, “Thank you.”

Unsure of what to do, Katsumi tilted her head and said, “Umm, I’m paying for the coffee!” This situation didn’t match her words.

“It’s been so long since we’ve been like this!”

Katsumi continued to talk on her own, ignoring Rinne who blurted, “I’m also paying! I can’t let you pay by yourself!”

What to say now? Rinne had always felt that her personality tends to put her at a disadvantage with people.

But Katsumi still liked this part of her.

"…Then, let's go home together."

It was already dark outside. The cloudy sky obscured the moon and stars created a feeling of unease.

A few random lights shone feebly through the cold. "Ugh. But I'm so happy."

Rinne smiled, and said seriously, "Let's ignore that for now. I still need to pay."

Ah, she's become a bit hard to deal with. Before, she would easily obey others with just a little bit of suggestion. But it seems Rinne grew up a little too.

Katsumi thought this with a bitter smile as she walked forward, waving her hands.

"Then, how about you treat me next time?"

"Eh?"

"We have to meet up again!"

Katsumi didn't look at Rinne.

What kind of expression did Rinne, who was standing behind her – the girl she betrayed before – have at the moment? Actually, in ninth grade, she had frequently wanted to start a conversation with Rinne. Every time they bumped into each other in the hallway, she wanted to apologize.

Katsumi's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry. Though I may not be worthy, can we still be friends forever?"

"……"

After a short silence, Katsumi's hand felt the grip of Rinne's warm hand.

“Alright.”

Even though she still couldn’t look Rinne in the eyes till the end.

“Then, see ya later.”

“Mmm, see ya.”

Katsumi swore in her heart to meet with her again.

And so, Katō Katsumi and Usagawa Rinne parted ways. Their paths home differed cruelly and had no chance of intertwining ever again —

After passing through the market street and crossing the road, all signs of people disappeared.

Behind Katsumi, who couldn’t hold back her tears, a sinister shadow who couldn’t possibly understand the two’s friendship approached from nearby.

“Shall we compare the length of our arms?”

Rudely and without cause, an unreasonable shiver shot down Katsumi’s back.

Katsumi reflexively turned around.

That was the turning point.

Unfortunately, for the girl Katō Katsumi, the existence that had cheerfully called out to her was not a resident of the world humans could understand with their logic.

It was an existence not meant to be encountered during a lifetime, and was merely something that one might pass by.

The girl who deviated from the peaceful world of humans just had to meet such a being. To meet the Long-Armed Demon… How would one put it? It would be considered bad luck, misfortune, a tragic fate, or the like. Even I can only think of one thing to say to her. And that would be: Rest in peace. That girl was singing. “In—the—clear—night—”

That girl was extremely innocent and naive, and straightforward to the point where people might question her sanity, but that only made her scarier. Though her high voice was clearly that of a girl’s,

and her appearance was normal, there was the feeling that she lacked some part of humanity. She gave off an impression similar to that of a carnivorous beast.

“The—moon—is—so—beautiful—”

As she sang, she danced an odd dance around Katsumi.

Seeming as if she would fall, she teetered to the right and tottered to the left, casting doubt as to whether she was dancing or simply drunk.

Katsumi simply stood there, silently and rigidly, watching that girl.

“Humans—are—so—annoying—to—see—”

The girl seemed like a grade-schooler. One couldn’t even be sure if she reached up to Katsumi’s chest.

In this cold weather, she only wore a colorful shirt, and even the legs showing under her skirt seemed cold.

Her hair was tied into two rather short pigtails, and because her overly bright smile she revealed a row of white teeth. In addition, her eyes shone incomprehensibly.

She suddenly stopped singing and dancing. “Boom”, she jumped in front of Katsumi.

“Good evening.”

Her voice still overflowed with friendliness, without the tiniest amount of malice.

However.

Katsumi suddenly felt the incongruity of this girl as she noticed this grade-school girl’s peculiarity.

Where, where was this incongruity? What was it? Katsumi watched her, quickly noticed something unbelievable, and screamed.

“My name is Long-Armed Demon. What’s yours, onee-chan? Hehehe, Long-Armed Demon forgot!”

The little girl didn’t have arms. From her shoulders, her entire arms were missing. Only space remained where one should have seen her

slender arms.

The arms were actually gone, rather than being hidden somewhere.

This was her only difference from normal people.

But Katsumi felt differently. From the girl's bodily constitution to her expression, she was completely different from a human…

She almost seemed like a spirit. No, more like… a demon?

That's right, she said she was a demon.

"…"

What was going on? This was too ridiculous. Katsumi's mind was completely fuddled.

"Long-Armed Demon?"

There was no way for Katsumi to understand this, and she could only fearfully step back slightly.

But behind her was a wall, leaving her with no way to escape. Escape? From such a tiny little girl? But she could sense the danger. Her instinct told her to hurriedly leave this girl called Long-Armed Demon.

As she trembled, Katsumi felt fear all the way deep inside her core, and ran as she pushed past the little girl.

"Eh, hey!"

For some reason, she felt unbelievably scared. She wasn't afraid due to the girl's appearance, she just felt that the girl… shouldn't exist in this world.

Katō Katsumi tried to lose the girl as she ran as fast as she could on the empty streets lit by neon lights.

Escape. I can escape. I can escape from you!

Otherwise…

"That's right — since I'm a demon with long arms, I'm called Long-Armed Demon."

The innocent voice rang in Katsumi's mind.

Then, Katsumi's body couldn't move. Screaming out, not understanding her situation, she opened her eyes wide.

Long-Armed Demon had not moved from her spot, but Katsumi's body stopped listening to her brain's commands. She could not move at all.

What was going on? This was some supernatural event! That's impossible! As her mind spun in a frenzy close to its breaking point, she thought of screaming, "Help —"

She couldn't help but think, *Help me, I'm about to be killed!*

This was the attitude of a human meeting a carnivorous beast.

The innocent little girl sweetly smiled.

"How is it? Long-Armed Demon's arms are so long, right?"

An immense force grabbed her shoulders.

It felt like a bodybuilder was crushing her shoulders. She could even clearly feel the pressure of five fingers.

The only logical assumption would have been that invisible arms reached over and grabbed her shoulders, holding her in place.

But how could there be such a thing?

Ghosts, monsters, superpowers - those things were all fictional, fantasy, and should only have existed in cartoons or on TV.

But Katsumi's fear of death made her entire body shudder, with her entire world in a hopeless, senseless madness. Like in TV, her life was now filled with supposedly impossible events. The sole difference was that for her, there would be no rescue.

"You can't run away. If I let you get away, I'll be punished by Zeki-kun."

- The girl's innocent voice spoke.

Zeki-kun? Katsumi only shuddered without pause.

- Behind her stood the girl who remained innocent looking and kept

a happy face.

She was too far away and out of reach even if Katsumi stretched out her hands. She was the terrifying Long-Armed Demon that completely annihilated Katsumi's ordinary life in the cover of this darkness.

She pouted unhappily, "But still, what exactly is your name? You have an Apple right? I was looking forward to this since I thought you'd be pretty strong, but this is boring. Zeki-kun's a liar, this isn't fun at all!"

Like a child disappointed with a toy recently bought, she said: "Whatever, I don't want something this boring. I'll throw it away."

Long-Armed Demon innocently, yet cruelly, threw Katsumi against the wall.

Katsumi heard a "Clack" before she understood that it was the sound of her clavicles and her ribs being smashed. The pain was too great to allow her to even scream.

The invisible arms grabbing her shoulders simply and purely inflicted blind destruction upon Katō Katsumi's body.

In other words, she was slammed onto the wall, smashed into it, beaten up, thrown away, suddenly thrown onto the ground before being picked up again and flung into the air with bones shattered and blood splattering everywhere and she was just being thrown and thrown and thrown…

"Crash–-Clang!"

That was the hollow and insubstantial bell of the night of the prologue, a bell that signaled the beginning of this night of sorrows.

Contrary to the New Year's bell that was sounded to welcome the New Year and to pray for the elimination of malevolent spirits, this was the bell of the night of prologue that suggested the end of Katō Katsumi's boring and beloved daily life and proclaimed the arrival and rampage of demons.

Her blood splattered everywhere. Her bones were long since crushed to smithereens and mashed together with pieces of flesh —

When Katsumi was smashed against the wall for the last time, Long-

Armed Demon squirted out a laugh, “Hee hee”.

“In—the—clear—night—”

She started singing, released her formless arms, and allowed the thing that used to be Katsumi to fall to the ground.

“The—moon—is—so—beautiful—”

Long-Armed Demon’s face did not reveal the slightest guilt at having murdered Katsumi, only showing that same bright expression as she walked up and narrowed her eyes to look closely at the piece of corpse on the ground.

“Humans—are—so—Eh?”

Long-Armed Demon stopped singing and used her invisible fingers to prod Katsumi’s body.

Then she showed confusion — this was the first time Long-Armed Demon revealed a perplexed expression — as she incessantly felt Katsumi’s body, her face turning deadly white.

“Eh, eh eh? Eh eh eh?” That was the expression of the child after a grave error, “N-n-no Apple? Why? How, How? But… but she died? She died but didn’t have an Apple? Eh, eh eh?”

Then she noticed.

Beside the lump of flesh that used to be Katō Katsumi, there was a book.

It was Kannonsakazaki High School’s student identification documents, but Long-Armed Demon didn’t know that, and only flipped through the bloodstained pages incredulously.

On the first page, there was a picture of her face, her address, her birthday, her name—

“Oh?”

That name was clearly different from the one Long-Armed Demon had been ordered to kill.

She had waited for Katsumi to leave that coffee shop, in which she stayed for oh-such-a-long-time, perched on the coffee shop’s roof… now that she thought about it, she accidentally wasted some time

when she got down. By the time she finally got back on her trail, aside from this girl called Katsumi, there was another person.

Since she disappeared into the darkness, Long-Armed Demon didn't see her clearly and thought she was a random bystander.

Could that person have been..?

Now that she thought of it, that person seemed to be around Katsumi's age.

Long-Armed Demon's face turned pale.

"Oops, hehehe. Long-Armed Demon made a little mistake!" Then she realized it was a bad time to laugh. She thought seriously: "Wh-what do I do now. I-i-it's so troublesome. Zeki-kun will scold me, I'll be, I'll be, I'll be punished. Waah, this sucks, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do?"

Long-Armed Demon felt flustered as she worried. Suddenly, she thought of a wonderful plan and jumped up, "That's right." She laughed, "Tee hee", and used her bright voice to mumble to herself in a harsh tone, "That's right. It's alright if I can find that girl from before. She'll definitely have the right name. What was that name again? And then, and then, I just need to get that person's Apple before Zeki-kun gets here and I'll be fine. I'm so smart!"

Then, with a presumptuous expression, "But I don't really know what she looks like. Oh… ah, that's right, killing all the girls of this age in this town should be fine! As long as I kill them it'll be alright, cos the one who doesn't die would have the Apple! Yeah!"

With this thought, she believed she might succeed.

And so, Long-Armed Demon did not even look at Katō Katsumi's corpse as she faded into the darkness.

How many girls of Katsumi's age did she think there were in this town?! But her steps were both light and full of hope as she walked away.

"In—the—clear—night—"

The thin, small figure disappeared into the dark and gloomy night.

"The—moon—is—so—beautiful—"

Only the song never ceased, pouring into the girl's miserable corpse.

"Humans—are—so—annoying—to—see—"

The above was the story of the strange girl that I saw.

Haha, what? You've got an incredulous expression now. Ah, do you not know why I told you this? This is… to put it to modern terms, this is a gift from the underworld. If you didn't know one or two interesting things, wouldn't the trip to Hell be too boring?

Moreover, I want to reflect on this event involving Long-Armed Demon. For that, unloading the facts onto someone else is an effective tool.

Perhaps for you, who are about to be killed, this isn't something interesting —but how do you feel about it? I wish to hear the opinions of you normal people who live inside the normality of life, unlike existences such as me who live on the other side.

Ah, you think this was nonsense? I guess I can't blame you for that. Maybe these things are indeed unbelievable for those of you living inside normality.

But this was absolutely true. This is a nightmare that is attacking Kannonsakazaki town as we speak. That's right. Perhaps your most important person would be attacked by Long-Armed Demon tomorrow.

Oh? Your expression changed. Eyes flaming with determination are so beautiful, and I like that. But that's not–-allowed–-because you must die here. My apologies, but that has already been decided.

Ah, haha, your face is full of unwillingness.

Are you annoyed that you can't protect a certain person? Hahaha, not bad, I wanted to see expressions like that.

You can go and die in such regret, grief, suffering, and die while cursing your own helplessness. Otherwise, the party that does the killing will get bored too.

But, don't worry, you're not bad people.

Nor are you germs or poison. You're simply humans that felt for

other people, powerful and impressive humans.

Therefore I will kill you with all of my sincerity rather than indiscriminately slaughter you. I will recognize you as a person as I kill you.

This conversation's been going on for too long. Then, please die.

What? My name? Hahaha, how can I tell it to people about to die? I can't handle it if you curse me! You're so foolish~

But, if it's my name over on **this side**, then there's no harm in telling you. It's your choice whether or not to believe that it's my real name. Whether or not you may curse me is also your choice.

Because this is a name that would shine even brighter when cursed.

My name is Sterilization Disinfection. I'm the digestive organ ——

Night 1: A Series of Misfortune

From ★ Usarin
To ★ Sensei
Subject ★ Edict
Body ★ Hello —— this is Usarin. Did you think I'd say that? You weirdo, go die! So where are you strolling around now? With your personality, you should've already left school to come see Rinne, so we didn't contact you. Then — we ended up waiting until noon! I didn't think you were this half-hearted with your love. You keep proclaiming your love for her. Is that just something you say?
Whatever. Rinne has me, Guriko, to comfort her. You can die somewhere in the street.

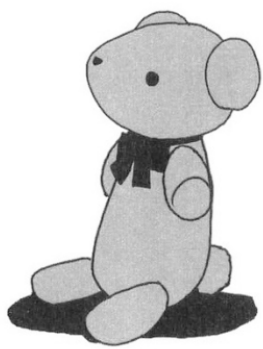
From ★ Sensei
To ★ Milady Usarin
Subject ★ Re: Edict
Body ★ Hey — what makes you think you can just use milady's cell phone like that. No matter how you look at it, it's best if you just died. Your harassment will someday give me a heart attack. Stop using her cell phone. Cell phones record phone numbers, so caller ID identifies that phone as "Usarin". This crap you're pulling will make me think milady suddenly changed. On another note, since when did you know how to use a cell phone?

From ★ Usarin
To ★ Sensei
Subject ★ From Gankyū Eguriko
Body ★ So much talk. Look, I wrote my name. Does that satisfy your demands? Go die now. Though it's a bit too much talk, where are you right now, Sakaki? Rinne's friend died so she's depressed. How can you not be at her side at a time like this? There's

more, you small, unworthy person. I’ve lived fifty times longer than you. Our level of experience can’t be compared. I can learn something like cell phone operation in an instant. Don’t underestimate me!

From ★ Sensei
To ★ Milady Usarin
Subject ★ Re: From Gankyū Eguriko
Body ★ Any grade-schooler can learn something like using a cell phone. Ah —— my bad, wait a minute. You should know that as soon as I learned about milady’s condition I came running over. But even before I arrive, you take what little you know and form conjectures about me. You idiot.

From ★ Usarin
To ★ Sensei
Subject ★ Re: Re: From Gankyū Eguriko
Body ★ …You're seriously infuriating. Whatever. Just get over here quickly. If you’re slow, I’ll gouge out your eyeballs.



"…"

The handsome man with golden hair and blue eyes —— Sakaki Guryū, closed his cell phone with a "snap". He sighed deeply. This man, humanity's pinnacle of intelligence, financial resources, appearance and athletic ability, was Usagawa Rinne's lover as well as her Japanese History teacher at Kannonsakazaki High School.

A year earlier, Sakaki had fallen in love with Rinne due to a certain incident, and abandoned the giant company controlling Japan from the shadows —— the Sakaki Organization. He had forsaken his position as its heir, as well as all his higher education, and became a high school teacher all in order to stay by Usagawa Rinne's side.

He felt that she was the only worthwhile existence in his life. That was the man named Sakaki Guryū.

Sakaki, unhappiness dominating his face, surveyed his surroundings while watching all four sides. People dressed in black were blatantly displaying illegal firearms.

“You see, one of my dear students has threatened me with eyeball gouging. She can easily carry out her threat, so you guys can get lost! I’d like to reject that eyeball gouging —— if I don’t hurry to milady’s home, I’ll lose these blue eyes I inherited from my mother!”

Rinne had been absent from school that day. As soon as Sakaki found out about this, he immediately stopped his class and ditched the staff meeting to go see her, but he was ambushed. It was around eight o’clock when he rushed out of class, and the maths showed he had been fighting for four hours. He kicked aside some of the black-suit flock, but was immediately surrounded again. Fighting them down one by one wasn’t tiring him out, but it was starting to frustrate him.

Rinne, he thought of Usagawa Rinne.

The one who gave Sakaki’s life meaning, the most important person in the world, was currently suffering. Yet these people in black suit were obstructing his path, which implied suicidal tendencies —— but who exactly were these enemies? If this continued, blood would probably be spilled.

“Are you Mushi?”

No response.

Mushi were the mysterious beings searching for the “Apples” —— also called “Apples of Eden”, the forbidden fruit which allowed humans who ate them to become immortal —— and they attacked humans to do so. Their true objectives remained a riddle, though someone who called himself Snake described them as beings similar to angels or demons.

When Sakaki fought against Snake the previous month, he happened to eat an Apple, and had since met multiple Mushi seeking to kill him. Thus, he assumed that this incident was the same, but ——

If they were Mushi, they should have unhesitatingly tried to kill him as fast as possible. But these black-suited people surrounding him showed no sign of using their guns. The tell-tale sign of the Mushi, eyes that shone with red light, could not be verified due to concealment by sunglasses.

“Even when there are guns pointed at you, that cell phone still takes priority, Guryū-onii-san?”

Suddenly, he heard a female voice that tried to hide mediocrity with an air of elegance. That was a familiar voice —— Sakaki’s patience ended as he turned to the source.

Behind the still wall of black-suited men, a girl stood.

“People that I, the Black Dragon, can stand the least are people like you who act as though everything lacked difficulty.”

From her black dress that was completely incongruous with this street in a small rural town to the ribbon on her head, all of her clothes were black. Aside from her skin, teeth and the whites of her eyes, it was as if her entire body was buried under black. She was one of the backup adopted siblings prepared in case something happened to Sakaki.

“Kuroki — Tatsue?” Sakaki mumbled her name as he put his cell phone in his pocket and looked at the black-suited men surrounding him. “So, you’re Sakaki Organization’s men. How pointless. Bothering me is a waste of time. Hey — I’ve already memorized your faces. Since you’ve pointed guns at the heir to the Sakaki Organization and committed the crime of preventing him from going to his destination, you’ll all be thrown out into the street.”

“Guryū-onii-san, you are still ignoring me?” Tatsue nervously raised her eyebrows as she spoke unhappily, holding onto a scarlet teddy bear that added an alien color to her monochrome look.

Should we say she was still too cautious, or is it more accurate to say that she was simply too narrow-minded?

Sakaki shifted his sight away from the black-suited men who didn’t know what to do as they lowered their guns, and looked toward his step-sister. “You’re just a spare backup. What did you come to find me, Sakaki Guryū, for? Back to the main topic, it’s been a long time since the last time we met, Tatsue. How many years has it been? Nine? You’ve grown so much. Last time I saw you, you were still

crying ‘I didn’t wet the bed! I didn’t!’ Ah, good times.”

“D-d-do not speak of that!” Tatsue’s face turned red. She waved her arms at the whispering black-suited men in front of her as she said this while on the verge of tears, “It’s because you’re so arrogant and ill-hearted that I cannot stand you.”

“Oh, and there’s that pretentious speech pattern you like to use. Don’t talk like that, you seem even more pathetic. In fact —”

Sakaki silently watched Tatsue. No, more accurately, he watched the scarlet teddy bear she held. It was something that could be bought anywhere, yet impossible to sell. Rather than looking cute, it horrified people with a bloodstained appearance that made it useless for consolation —

“Father.” Sakaki mumbled, crossing his arms as he sternly said, “You’re communicating with us like that again. How distrusting of your own son.”

“Eh?”

The surprised one was Tatsue. She was frightened enough to almost drop the teddy bear, and quickly tried to steady herself. As cold sweat ran down her face, her cute bluffing expression completely disappeared.

“F-f-father?”

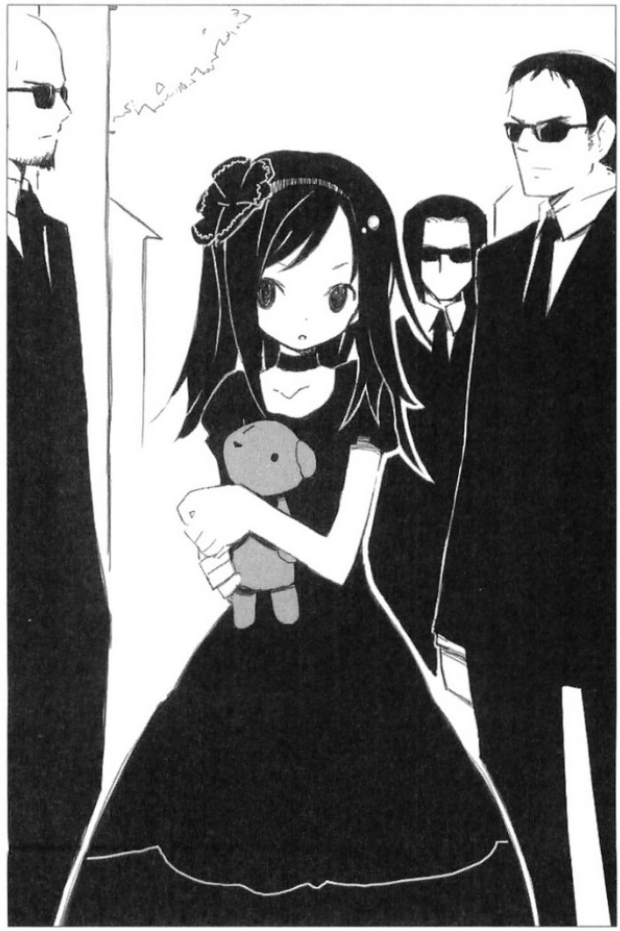
It was the current president of the organization with more power than a nation — Sakaki Ganhō. He likely feared assassination, as not even Sakaki had seen his face before. This led to Sakaki wondering if his father was even alive.

“……”

The scarlet teddy bear casually made a sound.

“Hey, Gu-tan, it’s dad.”

A clear, disarming synthetic voice came from the stuffed animal with a unique echo. Then again, with this type of voice, the speaker generally wants to avoid allowing his actual voice to be recognized. Sakaki nodded, and said casually, “What do you mean ‘It’s dad’, you idiot father. What do you want? I need to visit milady. If this is just for some pointless little thing, then leave!”



“B-b-brother! How could you speak like that to father!”

Sakaki paid no attention to Tatsue’s noisy shouting. No matter whose voice came out of it, that thing was just a stuffed animal that deserved no respect. Besides, Sakaki never respected his father, who forcefully molded him into an ideal heir. With the study and training that was practically infused into his blood, this person destroyed Sakaki’s childhood.

Without moving, the teddy bear laughed in a poorly synthesized voice.

“Hahaha! You’re still so frightening. Dad’s heartbroken! Mmm —

actually, there isn't really anything too serious. I just wanted to see my cute son that I haven't seen in a long time."

"Good bye."

Sakaki ignored Tatsue and the teddy bear and walked toward his destination. Running to Rinne's home from there would take about ten minutes. So much time had been wasted!

"Wait up, wait up, wait up, Gu-tan! Tatsue, chase him!"

The teddy bear said so nonchalantly, and Tatsue desperately followed its orders with a pale face. Too bad, it seems like this time she would only be used as a convenient transporter.

As Sakaki thought this, the teddy bear issued a cruel order.

"Ah, what a pain. He's trying to escape. Alright, you goons, shoot Gu-tan in the thigh! Then he'll stop, right? Don't worry, even if Gu-tan gets injured he'll quickly recover, so there's no need to hold back."

Those words…

Sakaki suddenly turned around, and looked angrily at the teddy bear held by the pale-faced Tatsue.

"Father, where did you find out about that?"

His injuries would recover. In other words, he knew that Sakaki ate an Apple and became immortal, with the superhuman ability to resurrect.

Speaking of that, a monster had wrecked the town a month earlier, and afterwards Sakaki had asked his father to arrange the media cover-up. The incident was reported to be a result of an earthquake, and eyewitnesses were forced to keep silent. Needless to say, the hidden truth should have gone straight to the man behind the cover-up —- the father.

However, only Sakaki, Rinne, and of course the Mushi and Snake as well as Guriko should have known about the Apples.

"Who do you think I am?" The teddy bear continued matter-of-factly. "Of course I know more than you do! I just don't tell you because I don't want you to sink deeper into this business. All in all,

there's nothing worthwhile there, and the knowledge would just be disgusting. Do you understand?"

He used an unnerving, emotionless voice to talk to the silent Sakaki.

"Last month," the teddy bear's words still sounded matter-of-fact, "an immensely large monster –- a Dream World Beast rampaged, right? Who do you think killed it? Or rather…how was it killed? Did you really think a few bombs dropped from a plane would be enough?"

That voice mocked Sakaki rather than questioned him.

"Whether with explosives or firebombs, did you think it was possible to soundlessly kill such a large monster? Not only that –- to exterminate a monster with extraordinary life force gained from an Apple, that can easily cause so much destruction? Can a weapon that incredible really exist?"

That was a joyful and delighted voice.

"If you just think about last month's events, so many things don't make sense. Gu-tan, you don't know anything. You misunderstood the whole situation despite having overcome that conflict. The Apple, the God, the Mushi! You barely understand any of them! –- But you don't need to understand them since you're my cute, adorable successor."

These words pierced Sakaki's ears and made his eyebrows curl.

After overcoming that and passing through a period of peace, he finally felt secure –- but now, it all became undone. What was going on? He felt horribly uneasy, his doubts suddenly layered up, and he began to feel disgusted by the Apple taking root in his soul.

"You, what are you trying to get at?"

"Ah? I'm just worrying like any normal father over his child's life. Basically, I want you to inherit the Sakaki Organization like a good boy while I do my best to keep you away from danger. Watch out for the names Tear Song, Catastrophe, The Weakest, Unpleasant Counter-Current, Single Room, God Insect Emperor, and Sterilization Disinfection. It's just as their names imply. If you involve yourself with them you die."

Mindlessly saying these unclear words, the head of the Sakaki

Organization –- Sakaki Ganhō laughed gloomily with his synthesized voice. Tatsue felt very afraid and looked at the stuffed animal in alarm.

Mushi, eyeball, and a teddy bear.

Not showing up in the previous month's events, hiding in the darkness, the third person who stayed out of sight while putting actions in motion –- he, Sakaki Ganhō, was there. What did he know, what did he want? The horrifying teddy bear merely spoke cheerfully to Sakaki, yet it seemed accusing.

"Mmm, I need to pick something to say. Since I'm pretty busy, I only wanted to say this one thing, but it got dragged out so long. Ah, that's right. I almost forgot."

The teddy bear suddenly moved and clapped its hands. It probably carried this function. "Waah!" Tatsue made a strange sound.

"Usagawa Rinne is your girlfriend right? I sent people to thoroughly investigate her these few months. Honestly, I don't know why you like her so much, Gu-tan."

Its head tilted.

Sakaki's expression turned cold as he glared at the teddy bear.

"Father, since you insulted milady, you will pay with your life!"

"How frightening. How frightening. See, even Tatsue's scared."

Actually, Tatsue was afraid of her father in her arms.

"Whatever, let's move on. Me, I don't care who you take as your wife, Gu-tan. Your mother actually came from a slum in America, and besides, the organization isn't run by wives. But, as it is now, no one would stay quiet. They'd say the lady's background is questionable and that she is not worthy to be the head's wife."

"Just eliminate those fools, father!"

"No way, that would be too troublesome. Since most of those idiots are famous, I'd have a lot of problems dealing with the aftermath!"

Hearing these unpleasant words, Tatsue secretly sighed at another direction. Sakaki acted as if he didn't notice and kicked at the ground restlessly, seeming to be in the mood for a fight.

“Then what? You —- would have me leave milady? Since I am so kind, I’ll tell you my decision right now. If I have to choose between this company and milady, I’d pick milady without any hesitation.”

“How stupid, to give up your inheritance for a woman…” Tatsue probably didn’t understand what was going on, and took Sakaki’s rant as truth. “Th-then, onii-san’s decision to not inherit the company is exactly what I’ve dreamed of!”

“Tatsue, stop acting tough. Your knees are shaking.” Sakaki quietly looked downward.

“……Oh.”

Tatsue’s back was stiff with fear, and she gritted her teeth reluctantly. The Sakaki Organization held enormous power, and inheriting its might would take far more ability and willpower than that possessed by a normal person. Tatsue had only recently turned fifteen. She was only in high school, and definitely did not hold such a level of wisdom or maturity. “Okay, in short”. The teddy bear —- Ganhō —- nonchalantly gave his conclusion in the frightening monotonic synthetic voice.

“You say you can only love Usagawa Rinne, and the people around me say she’s not good enough. Then isn’t it easy? Yup. Just make Usagawa mature. Turn her into a woman acceptable as the lady of the Sakaki Organization. I’ve prepared a lot for this. And since you two want to marry as soon as she graduates, have her use her time in school to improve in every aspect.”

After hearing these words, Sakaki was forced to remember his own hellish upbringing, and frowned.

The training that would cause Rinne to mature —- that would be exceedingly harsh, and the mere thought of it disgusted Sakaki.

Her close friend just died. She was in an unstable mood. What would happen if she were to suffer even more?

“Father.”

Sakaki showed a serious face. He said calmly, “If you subject milady to that sort of inhuman preparation, I would not hesitate to overthrow you. Do not forget, that moment will be the moment when you and I part ways forever.”

The teddy bear did not respond, possibly having said all that it wanted, and beckoned Tatsue to leave. The men in black followed, saluting Sakaki before disappearing down the road.

Tatsue looked back at the end.

For the first time, she showed a human expression filled with worry. “Guryū-onii-san, be careful.”

Sakaki did not respond as he turned toward Rinne’s home, walking over the poorly paved road.

“No problem, no problem, Guriko-chan worries too much. It’s fine, because I’m really good at cooking and using the kitchen knife. Ah… mmmhmm, hahaha.”

“Blood! Wait, Rinne, you’re slicing your own finger! Blood, blood… Calm down, don’t force yourself to try to cook. Sakaki and I don’t need to eat anyway. If you weren’t immortal, you’d be in a lot of trouble from cutting your fingers!”

Guriko was truly at a loss for what to do.

Near Kannonsakazaki Private High School, which Rinne and Guriko attended and where Sakaki worked, past the shopping district and a small, bumpy road – stood the apartment building where Rinne lived.

With walls that seemed like they would collapse with a light knock, this shabby building had an extraordinarily cheap rent. She lived in a apartment with – counting the bathroom – 7.5 square meters of space, and next to her lived a self-proclaimed musician, an older girl whose face reflected tough times.

Ever since Katō Katsumi was murdered by an unknown killer, Rinne had holed up inside this room without taking a single step outside.

As one would expect, the shadow of the murder grievously damaged her heart. For immortal people, the mind was a place of weakness. Since physical pain is no longer felt, they are more easily hurt by emotional anguish.

Yes. Three days ago, what was probably the first murder in Kannonsakazaki had occurred. The victim’s name was Katō

Katsumi. Like Rinne and Guriko, she was a student at Kannonsakazaki Private High School, who had formed an unbreakable bond with Rinne since middle school.

Shortly after parting from Rinne in front of a coffee shop, she had been brutally murdered by someone. Indeed, the method was quite merciless; she had been violently slammed against a stone wall and ground. Guriko didn't care so much since she was already used to death and corpses. The one who suffered was Rinne. As the last person to have seen Katsumi, she was thoroughly questioned. Over and over again, the fact that Katsumi died was shoved at her.

What kind of feelings did she have?

Rinne, in this state, appeared no different from how she was before at first glance. She smiled like before, and though her voice trembled a bit, she seemed far from insane. But those were obviously only her attempts at stoicism. Not only were her actions more sluggish, her expression was also fixed at a barely maintained fake smile. As if insisting there's nothing wrong, she tried to cook, but only created failure that caused problems for Guriko.

People who had eaten an Apple would slowly lose their sense of taste. Any sort of feelings of hunger, emptiness, or pain from an empty stomach would also disappear. Therefore, Rinne's actions were completely meaningless. But Guriko thought this could at least help turn her mood around, and so wordlessly accepted the behavior.

And so, Rinne stopped preparing a dish out of her fingers without losing that small smile, but as soon as she began to rest, the doorbell rang.

"Sakaki?"

Guriko mumbled to herself, staying cautious as she walked over to open the door.

"Guriko, is milady alright?"

As expected, there stood a handsome man with blue eyes and blond hair who seemed more like a piece of art. He grabbed Guriko's shoulders and forcefully shook her, while she sighed with her eyes half closed.

"What do you mean 'Is she alright?', it's not like she'll die. Stop

panicking and calm down. And stop shaking me, I feel like throwing up. Really, as soon as anything involves Rinne, you immediately lose all common sense."

Guriko called at Rinne, but when she turned to look, she noticed that Rinne had suddenly collapsed.

"Rinne?" Sakaki's eyes widened, with an expression appropriate for the apocalypse. "Ah, ah –- milady! Milady died!"

"She didn't die, calm down! And, stop shaking me or I'll gouge out your eyes, idiot!"

As Gankyū Eguriko endured the shaking, she prepared her spoons.

"She's definitely extremely tired."

With a head of her distinguishing wolf-like hair, eyes deep like the barrel of a gun, and with the brutal name "Gankyū Eguriko", this immortal girl had lived for over a thousand years. Once, due to some random event, she had changed her name to True • Gankyū Eguriko, but, giving the practical reason that it was too hard to pronounce, she reinstated her original name.

This uncute girl who lived with Rinne for certain reasons placed the collapsed girl on prepared bedding, and started talking, "If you feel stressed, your body reacts accordingly. You would get a stomach ache, vomit, or get a headache. However, people who have eaten an Apple won't feel those. So, they push themselves to their limit, until they can't take it anymore and collapse. Really, if your friend dies, isn't it alright to bawl your eyes out? No one would blame her."

Guriko looked at Sakaki, who walked closer, and silently held the shoulders of the fast-asleep Rinne and gave her to Sakaki. He wasn't sure what to do and just held her, feeling that her powerless form was exceptionally vulnerable.

"Guriko?"

"I don't understand friendship or love."

Guriko showed a sad expression, and she began to clean the blood-splattered simple kitchen. Probably trained by Rinne, Guriko had gained the ability to clean and do laundry. Yet a thousand years' emptiness had, in the end, erased from her any form of emotion or common sense.

As if reciting text, Guriko nonchalantly said, “I don’t understand, I forgot. So there’s no way I can comfort Rinne, which is frustrating……All I can do is annihilate Rinne’s enemies. I definitely can’t cure the scars burnt into Rinne’s heart.”

She then turned toward Sakaki with those lonely eyes that, according to Rinne, seemed to be very similar to Sakaki. “So, I’m a bit jealous of you.”

Was he really similar to her? Compared to Guriko, who admitted that she could only defeat Rinne’s enemies but could not heal her pain, wasn’t he only able to comfort Rinne without any way to fend against Rinne’s enemies? Sakaki pondered this.

Helpless, Sakaki held Rinne tightly, and Guriko looked at them with concern. Rinne’s closed eyes brimmed with tears; was he unable to save her, even in her dreams? Her face looked devoid of blood, and her fingertips were abnormally cold. To warm her up, Sakaki held her even closer.

Sakaki instinctively spat out insults.

“How repulsive, just who was it that killed Katō?!”

“How would I know?”

As she washed the cutting board with dishwashing liquid, Guriko crooked her head and said, “Although, just by looking at the facts, the culprit shouldn’t be a normal person. Possibly some super-strong man or an animal. Or it’s—”

She turned on the faucet.

“A monster.”

Monsters, those things that quietly lived outside the world of people like Sakaki, alien that overstepped the boundary of understanding. During the events in the month before, Sakaki encountered quite a few monsters. The most powerful of them was large enough to flatten buildings with each step.

Katsumi’s tragic death truly didn’t seem to be caused by humans.

Sakaki’s mood worsened, but he still said uneasily, “Anyways, it’s best to stay cautious. After all, we haven’t confirmed the culprit. Hopefully it’s some criminal that the police can handle… Guriko?”

He carelessly looked over, and noticed Guriko's grim gaze toward the entrance. Her expression was strange, as if she was shocked, staring at the door with stiff face.

"What is it?"

"Someone's here."

Guriko replied curtly.

Sakaki's eyebrows scrunched together. "Could it be the mailman? Or… the murderer?"

Even though he felt it was unlikely, he couldn't deny the possibility. Guriko firmly gripped her three spoons. Whether in the past or now, her weapon of choice had always been spoons.

"I don't know. Don't talk, someone will hear you. Although, I don't think it's a monster."

Possibly listening for activity, Guriko's face turned beast-like, instinctively searching out enemies and avoiding danger. That was the first-rate caution developed over a millennium.

"Humans, two of them."

Guriko was incredulous. Humans - and since there were two, it probably wasn't that self-proclaimed musician woman who lived next door. And it shouldn't be Rinne's friends since students had already been instructed to avoid going out without good reason. And Guriko definitely did not have anything that could be considered even similar to a friend —

As Sakaki thought this, the doorbell rang. After a glance from Guriko, he cautiously walked toward the entrance. They planned so that even if Sakaki was knocked down by a surprise attack, Guriko could repel the intruders. That is to say, Sakaki was bait — "living sacrifice" might also be accurate. He tried to put on a calm voice as he asked, "who is this?"

"We're with the Sakaki Organization."

"Please leave," Sakaki immediately declared, turning his back to the door as he shrugged his shoulders and sighed to Guriko, "No need to be so careful, they aren't people who matter."

“I see.” Guriko obediently set down her spoons.

At that moment, the door was suddenly forced open. Although it wasn’t locked to begin with.

The pair standing on the other side of the door solemnly saluted.

“Though it was quite rude, please forgive my rudeness.”

“Hino, that sounded weird.”

“I’m Itsuwara Hino.”

“My name is Itsuwara Kio.”

Standing there were — an exceedingly normal man and woman of about forty years of age, wearing a gray suit and a milky white outfit respectively. They were people who didn’t stand out, people the likes of whom one would probably brush past while walking in the city.

“What do you want?”

Sakaki looked at them with barely-concealed disgust. Since they were men of the Sakaki Organization, they must have been his father’s men. There was no way he could trust them.

The two people smiled tenderly, so much that they seemed unnatural. “A pleasure to meet you, Guryū-san.”

“You’re in a good mood as always, it seems. Anyway —”

The man calling himself Kio smoothly pointed at Guriko.

“Today we have business with that young lady…”

Guriko was bewildered.

“…”

Colors distributed using an alien ratio clustered together. In simpler terms, toys with many different colors were in front of her. For some reason, it seemed like all children’s toys were purely made with primary colors, and it was painfully dazzling. The confusing red, blue, and yellow made one dizzy.

This was the shopping center called Chaos Zen Quiz — an underground shopping street where all sorts of specialty shops and peddlers gathered. Probably since it was a holiday, customers were abundant, and Guriko almost got lost multiple times.

She had no interest in shopping, nor did she enjoy it, and she wanted to get as far away from this overcrowded place as possible. Plus, since Rinne had such a low income, she couldn't go shopping often, and had never deliberately taken the bus to come three stations to this shopping center. This place seemed to Guriko like a different, miniature alien world.

The activity they did now all seemed like normal, human life, which made Guriko feel like she fit into modern Japanese society. Yet in this "Chaos Zen Quiz", there were too many things she had never seen. Was it really Japan, just like Kannonsakazaki?

For example, Guriko was standing in "Witch's Torture" for some reason, a specialty toy store with a name sounding like a finishing move, but completely she lacked knowledge on the toys arranged there. She tentatively picked up a nearby teddy bear. "So this is what they call a teddy bear?" And she sighed deeply with emotion.

"Ah, Guriko-chan, you like that teddy bear?" "Then everyone in the family can get a teddy bear. Wow, Guriko, you picked a teddy bear that's just as cute as you are. Then I'll pick a teddy bear that takes as much care of itself as I do, and Hino should a transformer torture bear that's like Hino!"

"Really, you idiot Kio, that was too much!"

"Hahaha."

"….."

What's going on now? These people have made enough noise, I really want to slaughter them. The Itsuwara couple, Hino and Kio, smiled gently behind the coldly grimacing Guriko, and one would find the excessive smiling somehow strange. With no reservation, they brightly said to Guriko, "Guriko-chan. You don't have to be so polite, because we'll be your parents. Just tell us if there's anything you want, and talk with us if anything's troubling you."

…My worries all stem from you two.

Facing the stiffened-up Guriko, Kio pushed his ideals forward again,

“Guriko, girls usually name their teddy bear. Wanna try it out? Since common sense and standard social morals develop through things like this.”

Common sense and standard social morals, huh?

Guriko refused to recognize those things. But, even so…

“A name? Yono.”

With a serious face, Guriko looked at the teddy bear that looked like a delinquent acting cool. Hino smiled, saying some meaningless words of praise — Oh, what an excellent name. Truly worthy of

Guriko-chan —

What was going on now? Guriko pondered.

The Itsuwara couple, Hino and Kio, who suddenly appeared, claiming to be specially sent by the Sakaki Organization. Since they had identification, they probably weren't lying. In this country, if someone tried to con others using the Sakaki Organization's name, he'd suffer more than if he were arrested on the spot. The Sakaki name had that kind of power. Conversely, by associating oneself with the Sakaki Organization, one's position and respect was as good as guaranteed.

Guriko set the still-unconscious Rinne on the futon and let Hino and Kio sit down.

Even though they claimed to have business with her — Guriko eyed them suspiciously. She was sure she had never seen them before.

The narrow, 7.5-square-meter room was filled with the scent of food. Since the kitchen was part of the room, it was impossible to eliminate the smell even if air freshener is sprayed every once in a while. Rinne was quite a meticulous and neat person, but it was impossible to deny that the undersized room would easily appear cluttered and messy. Between the wardrobe, the TV, textbooks and the like, and the kotatsu, even walking around was difficult.

"Common sense and standard social morals training?" Sakaki was bewildered.

"What did you say?" Guriko didn't understand.

Hino smiled with happiness that almost seemed fake, as if saying "This is really great". With hands folded she continued, "Right, common sense and standard societal ethics training. That's what it's called. It's like someone's trying to act smart by using hard words."

"Yup, though it sounds like a legal term, it's actually pretty simple."

Kio interjected with a cheerful voice. This couple were really similar.

"In simple terms — no, using the most obvious and clear terms, it's 'Have Guriko-chan understand common sense' or 'The Sakaki Organization won't be able to help you either if you never live a normal life'. So… That's how it is."

His words made Sakaki's expression change as the teacher disgustedly looked at Guriko.

"Guriko, what the hell did you do?" "No clue."

She really had no idea what they were talking about. After all, she had only been living according to her own beliefs.

Then, with that giant smile, Hino was saying stuff that really shouldn't be said while smiling.

"Guriko-chan isn't someone who should be living with Usagawa Rinne-san."

Hearing this, Guriko's eyebrow twitched a little. She was indeed someone who shouldn't live with Usagawa Rinne.

I don't need others to tell me something like that. I ***know*** *that. From the start we only lived together out of practicality, since I had nowhere else to stay.*

But I don't want some outsider who doesn't understand anything to tell that to me.

Guriko glared at them. Kio, completely unfazed, looked toward Sakaki.

"Guryū-san, Ganhō-san believes it is most important to begin fixing Usagawa-san's surroundings. A person's behavior will be greatly affected by her environment. If the environment is filled with trash, the stench will permeate the person. If she is surrounded by people using vulgar language, she will inevitably start speaking the same way."

"So we need to clean up her surroundings. By thoroughly fixing the things around Usagawa Rinne-san, it will be possible for her to mature in a sound environment." Hino picked up where Kio left off, making it seem as though they planned it in advance.

Sakaki's face stiffened, contemptuously glaring at them. "Basically, Guriko's a hindrance?"

Hino and Kio spoke together. "You are correct, Guryū-san."

"Why…"

Guriko couldn't ignore this, and banged her fist on the kotatsu with

flaming eyes. She made a loud noise, but Guriko still took care not to break it.

The teacups set on the table rattled and fell.

Guriko released the anger she held: “You… How am I a hindrance? Aren’t you saying that I’m a bad influence on R-Rinne?”

The words lacked her usual sharpness. Guriko vaguely felt that she had brought Rinne into an abnormal world. Granted, even if she did not appear, Rinne would have eventually noticed her Apple’s power. But in the end, it was Guriko who made this happen faster.

But, even so…

I don’t want Rinne to say she doesn’t need me or, even worse, think of me as a nuisance.

Yet Kio naturally said, “Yes, you’re quite a hindrance and a bad influence.”

Toward this formality that was like defining simple English words, Guriko didn’t know whether to feel enraged or hurt. She looked toward Sakaki, whose face showed a confused expression as he remained silent.

“But,” Sakaki spoke heavily and seriously in a low voice, “milady was saved thanks to Guriko. You cannot deny that.”

“True, we know that.”

“But right now, her influence is undesirable in many ways.”

Hino shot a glance at Kio, who rapidly set onto the table several documents from his bag. Guriko couldn’t resist looking at them, but the text was filled with complicated words made her head spin.

Hino explained with a bitter laugh: “These are the recent records of Guriko-chan causing injuries, breaking things, attempting murder, *etc.* Mmm, there’s really too much. Even though these incidents won’t be investigated since Ganhō-san’s handling them, this is truly too terrible even if you take into account fact that she’s a minor.”

“Guriko isn’t a minor.” Guriko nodded in consent with Sakaki’s words.

The Itsuwara couple were shocked, looking at each other as if

asking “What’s going on?”

That’s right, Guriko was about a thousand years old. Even though she couldn’t remember the exact number, she should probably be the elder of every human on this land. At events like Shichi-Go-San people would eat thousand-year candies; the makers probably never imagined that someone would actually be that old. Though this isn’t relevant to what Hino was saying, it was still true.

Normally, beating someone up or attempting murder would result in punishment. That is justice. It is something that would be obvious with a little bit of thought. Yet, from the start, one shouldn’t expect Guriko, who had wandered for a thousand years, to have this kind of common sense or morals.

Guriko looked at Hino, who nodded her head as if understanding Guriko’s feelings.

“Right, developing common sense and standard social morals as the goal, we want Guriko-chan to stop doing that kind of bad things and become a normal person. You commit crimes far too frequently. Ganhō-san has decided that living with a person like that will definitely hamper Usagawa-san’s development.”

To be honest, this makes a lot of sense.

And I don’t want to trouble Rinne if possible.

As if to let her relax, Kio gently smiled. “Obviously, you’ll be able to return immediately after the training finishes. When you learnt the common sense that you can use to become part of society and no longer bothered with living like a normal person, and it is decided that you no longer give Usagawa-san’s bad influences, the training will end.”

“…”

Guriko thought about it: *So it’s like this. I can understand. But the problem is, I want to stay be Rinne’s side. I don’t want to leave her — Even though I understand the logic.*

Guriko looked at Rinne who was sleeping, curled in the futon.

I can’t cause problems for her.

“Alright, I accept.”

Guriko made her resolution. It shouldn't take too long anyway, and time itself is unlimited. There is no rush. Nothing's wrong with accepting their common sense and standard social morals training! Guriko thought this way.

Astonished, Sakaki turned toward her. "Is that alright? Guriko, if you really don't want to do it, I can think of something."

"You're too nosy. You have nothing to do with this. In short, I don't want to trouble Rinne."

Hino and Kio's faces lightened into similar and unrestrained smiles.

"Wah, thanks. Guriko, I'm really happy!"

"I, I, I'll strive to become a superb mother!"

"I'll also become a dependable father! Let's go, it'll get busy starting today!"

Guriko noticed something weird, looking without understanding at the two people who got incredibly happy on their own.

"Wh-what? What's the meaning of this? What mother, father?"

"What?"

Kio, who was elated to shivers while embracing Hino, spoke of something absurd with an indignant tone: "Common sense and standard social morals training consists of Guriko living with us as our daughter! The plan is to slowly teach common sense and ethics through cohabitation!"

"There is much to teach, Guriko-chan! From today onward you are Itsuwara Eguriko! Waahhhh–-"

Isn't it a bit early to decide that?

Gankyū Eguriko — correction, Itsuwara Eguriko sighed.

"That said, who is Itsuwara Eguriko?"

Things have gotten crappy, Guriko thought this as she sat in an Italian restaurant on a restaurant-filled street eating spaghetti. In fact, not only did Guriko have no appetite, she didn't even need food, so what she did was meaningless. But to prevent the Itsuwara couple, who knew nothing, from getting suspicious, it was best for the time

being to momentarily reactivate the nerves in her digestive system, act like she was hungry, and let the food flow into her stomach. Back before she became immortal, she never thought stuffing down alien substances into herself could be so disgusting.

“Wah, Hino, this pizza’s on the level of national treasures! Call the chef over!”

“That pizza was definitely frozen! But it’s so good!”

“Guriko. It’s good, right?” “Guriko-chan, don’t you also think it’s good?”

They were also alien.

Their affection — alien.

Swallowing it was a bit disgusting.

“…”

That’s right, to me these should be meaningless, unrelated people. They’re a couple that I didn’t even know yesterday. Their names are Itsuwara Hino and Itsuwara Kio. Aside from the fact that their personalities are ridiculous and over-the-top, they aren’t anything special, just a man and woman that can be found anywhere.

Guriko agreed to take the common sense and standard social morals training with that overly long name, and after entrusting the unconscious Rinne to Sakaki came along with these people. What followed was nothing but a series of new novelties and shocks. Was this normalcy? Guriko could not understand.

—It’s alright as long only you are unhappy—

Guriko recalled that time when she was still called Yono. A thousand years ago, when Guriko was genuinely human, without anything like immortality.

Guriko had been adopted into a household, and received cold treatment from the family members. She thought this was alright, since they gave her food to eat and at night time they helped prepare bedding for her. When her older brother was in a good mood he would even play with her. But she often felt an indescribable loneliness. When she noticed it, she was all by herself.

Over and over again, her parents would say to her that it's alright as long as she is unfortunate. Though Guriko felt hurt, she still accepted it completely, and she felt that this was the normal relationship between parent and child. The parental relationships that Guriko knew, that remained in her memory, were dry and without feeling, like the relationships between a pack of beasts.

But —

Guriko lightly stroked the teddy bear on her leg, that one called Yono. *Rinne seemed to have said before that she wanted a teddy bear. But I never thought the day would come when I would get one.*

Even though she didn't particularly want one.

For some reason, she didn't want to throw it away either.

Toy stores, clothing stores, stationary stores; they went to every type of store and bought everything they needed. Guriko bought three shirts, shoes, and things which she had always wanted but never thought to buy: high quality spoons that didn't come from a dollar store.

She never expected a day to come when she didn't need to steal and could obtain her own things legally. This teddy bear was Guriko's, and Guriko's alone.

Thinking like this, her mood suddenly improved.

So—

"Ugh."

While suppressing her urge to vomit, Guriko forked down her spaghetti. Giant bite after giant bite, she ate expressionlessly, and then politely said, "It's not bad."

Just this much was enough for them to heartily laugh.

"Wah! Guriko seems to like it too!"

"This restaurant really is the best! Even though it's a chain restaurant!"

"Call the chef over! Call the chef over!"

Really, why are they so idiotic, I've had enough. I don't accept them as

my family. But… This doesn't really feel bad.

Can I find a way to treat them as my parents? No, that's impossible. There's no way today, but maybe one day I'll be tricked by this irredeemable, ridiculous kind of atmosphere. I can't be sure if I will one day form some illusions from this.

"Yono died a thousand years ago."

She stroked the teddy bear as she spoke softly.

"Ever since then, I've always been Gankyū Eguriko. I… can I already stop using that freakish name? I don't know… Do I want to? I can't figure it out."

Guriko's was not good with thinking, so she just decided to leave her worries for tomorrow. Her time won't run out, anyways. Back to the present, it was enough to go along with this situation that can only be described as disastrous.

Kio looked at Guriko, whose head was lowered, and his expression was like he stuck gold. "Wah, Guriko! There's sauce stuck on the corner of your mouth! I'll wipe it off for you!"

"That's my job, Kio! Move!"

"— Let's get wiping together!"

And so Guriko ended up in this doubly-being-wiped situation, becoming aware of the peculiarity in the corner of her mouth as her muscles moved a little. Unable to believe it, she pushed aside the napkins pressed to her and placed her fingers on the corner of her lips.

She understood. And as a result felt somewhat surprised.

"I'm… smiling."

Guriko smiled very faintly. Such a rare occurrence, and in front of people she met for the first time today to boot.

Apparently, she actually was enjoying herself.

"Whoa, Guriko smiled! It's so cute, I'm gonna collapse!"

"Same here! Ah—Guriko LOVE, LOVE! Mmmmmmmm…."

After finishing their weird noises the two pretended to faint, causing nervous murmurs from the other customers.

Even though this wasn't her desire at all, Guriko seemed to feel a little joy.

That night.

"Art."

In an empty park.

"Art — Yeah, misery taken to the limit will be called beautiful art."

A ball abandoned by children after they finish playing, sad-looking playground equipment that seemed to absorb the silent desolation. A messy sandpit. Inside this slightly small park, there was a bench in front of the water fountain.

"Obscene, vulgar, base, filthy — corpses that normal people hate without reason can shine as art. Hahaha. It's true, the beautiful human corpse is beautifully artistic. Lavish and wonderful, miserable and wonderful, cruel and wonderful. Ahh, what's going on, why is a heartless person such as me unable to suppress my body shuddering with excitement!"

A female was sitting there.

"How about a toast to this beauteous night? The full moon and stars are all so beautiful, so how about a toast with sweet wine? Let's use death of the highest quality to make people shiver."

Pieces of human flesh were scattered around her.

Under the lamppost that struggled to keep shining, the woman weaved words in a honey-sweet voice without speaking to anyone in particular. Signs of life were completely gone in this playground in the residential area after sundown and no one noticed this bloody, brutal scene. Flesh and blood surrounded the woman on the bench. Those were the only two things scattered around. Just what kind of flesh was it? It was impossible to tell by looking at the pieces, but that glossy red flesh was still fresh, steaming in the chilly winter air.

With some light from the moon, stars, and lamppost the flesh looked a bit brown, and the blood lying all around had turned completely black while seeping into the ground. This was a scene that lacked a sense of reality, leaving only a ruthless stillness.

As if appreciating a famous painting, the woman merely sat silently, watching.

“I really want to keep –”

She sighed.

“Looking at this — Ah, I made something awesome! No, wait, that’s too arrogant. The creators of this work are none other than you who have become corpses. I am only the lucky one who can appreciate the art before it rots.”

Truly, how many wonders are hidden within this Earth? She can’t see this entire world no matter how long she lives. Simply, this woman loved this wondrous world.

The only things that could be heard were the horn of a distant car, the wind, and the rustling of the leaves on the park’s trees. The world was covered in darkness, appearing rather mysterious.

There was only the shadow of a building, park’s gravel ground with cobbles mixed within, and a group of moths attracted by the scent of blood.

“Moths — ah.”

The woman sighed again. Every time she did so, a sound would come from her mouth similar to the sound of a teapot releasing steam.

That would be expected, because a mask was covering her mouth. It was not for preventing colds or allergies; rather, the clear purpose was to block dust or toxic gas. The unusually-shaped hard mask seemed especially out of place on her graceful appearance.

Thanks to a mask, it was hard to see her expression, and her age was uncertain though she seemed to be between 25 and 29. Slim yet dangerous, she reminded one of a sharpened blade. Over her thin, tender body, she wore extremely revealing clothes.

A tank top with angel wings printed on the back hid a girl-like body that belied her outer appearance. It was winter now, but her snow white skin was completely free of goosebumps. The only thing barely covering her waist area was a pair of jean shorts that stopped at mid-thighs.

A head of flawlessly pure white hair, untainted by anything; it was the color of fresh snow. The waist-length hair was tied into a ponytail. On her wrists she wore all sorts of bracelets, wrist guards, and colorful strips of cloth.

This strange looking woman's eyes were the only parts of her that turned sinister, and she spoke into the darkness as she crossed her legs as if pondering something. She had a habit of speaking out loud to organize her thoughts, feeling that doing this let her sort out important points.

"Mushi… Ah, Mushi. That group of Mushi gathered and acted strangely last month, and though it quickly became peaceful again I don't know what happened in the first place."

A breeze brushed past her hair.

"It is believed that the one responsible is the Apple holders living in this town. The four confirmed individuals are Usagawa Rinne, Sakaki Guryū, Gankyū Eguriko, and—"

As she spoke, she seemed to think about something.

"That person tried to steal their Apples by pretending to be and manipulating Mushi. Honestly. I didn't think that clan still existed! This is ominous. Adam, Eve, and the Snake… The humans descended from Adam and Eve reproduced far too quickly to eliminate, but if the last descendant of the Snake causes trouble I can exterminate him."

The woman stared forward with a grave expression.

"I'll start by taking Apples away from some suitable holders. If that works, I can ask about what happened at that time. Really, why do I have to do this kind of annoying business? I'm just the digestive organ. Seeking out the truth is God Insect Emperor's job."

The others were just too lazy. It felt like she was doing all the work.

"This is so annoying. I'm going to tremble."

The woman allowed her body to shake, and then she hugged herself as if to protect herself. This was something she did without any particular meaning.

With a “Fshuu—Fshuu—” breathing sound coming from the mask, she muttered to herself, “Basically, it doesn’t matter which of those four. I’ll start by taking the Apples.”

Then she looked at the pieces of flesh scattered in front of her, thinking, thinking, and came up with an idea.

“- Then, I really will need these pieces of flesh. Even though I don’t want to use these pieces of art on anything —”

“Wh-Whooa?”

A scream?

The woman’s expression instantly became alert as she turned toward the sound. The rapid movement made her hair swing rapidly. In her line of sight was —

“Eh, umm. These are corpses… Waahhh!”

The woman calmly watched this person. He was a male police officer in a blue uniform without any distinctive features, and didn’t seem to be an excellent cop. Shuddering, he pointed at the hands and guts and other body parts on the ground, and screamed before collapsing on the ground as his mouth opened and closed.

Did the police notice it? Of course police officers patrolled residential areas. Chances were Long-Armed Demon acted on her own too much, so the police had been especially alert recently.

“Long-Armed Demon, Apple holders, police–-” The woman sighed with a “Fshuuu”, and seemed to be exhausted as she shrugged her shoulders. “So troublesome.”

Then she got up and turned to the policeman sitting paralyzed on the ground. He seemed to have just noticed her, and let out a stiff shout as he scooted backward on his backside.

“Don’t… Don’t tell me! Are you the L-long Armed Demon?”

“Ugh.”

The woman frowned and walked slowly towards the man. “I’m not

that prevented child. Now, my name is Saibara Mina, I really hate this name because — it's not cute."

After that, she took a spray can from somewhere and pointed it at the policeman. It was an extremely common spray can, simple and unlabeled. On the outside it didn't look different from insecticide or deodorant that gets sold.

"Hmm."

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh"

The woman shook it while remaining still, shaking in a way that didn't look special.

"If you want address me, please call me Sterilization Disinfection."

With a face like he'd seen a ghost, the police officer screamed loudly and frantically tried to crawl away and escape.

He knelt on the ground, screaming as he tried to get up, but his legs didn't listen to his commands and he collapsed again. He seemed so scared that he couldn't even control himself anymore.

"Fshuu" — Mina sighed in resignation.

"What an unbearable policeman. No courage at all. He's contaminating my field of view."

The policeman could not understand Mina's words, screaming as he stood up.

"S - Senpai! Save me! Nageki-senpai!" Did he have companions? It would be troublesome if he called over too many people.

Mina quickly made her decision.

"Save me! L-Long Armed Demon, she's the Long Armed Demon!"
I've told you I'm not that person.

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh" Mina shook her spray can, and slowly turned to face the man.

"Let's sterilize and disinfect."

Night 2: Melancholic Officer and a Long-Armed Demon

“Let’s compare how long our arms are!”

It was an abandoned building where children who had no place in their families had gathered. The present youths of varying age and gender were currently terrified with a sudden abnormality. It was a night that should have been the same as any other. Unable to sleep and feeling irate, they come here at night to chat and have fun with strangers who dressed in the same way as they did.

It was their daily life, a life remaining the same day after day that they took for granted.

And now this normality had cracked. It had been smashed apart with ease.

A demon.

One of the youths had already died, his abdomen heavily pummelled by the invisible fist that the demon stretched out.

Death. That was death. It wasn't fake – he really died.

Everything shattered.

"Uwoaaaaahhh, enough fooling around!"

A boy, half-mad, rushed at Long-Armed Demon with his bare fists. Those youths had too many enemies: the police, adults who didn't understand them, violent juvenile derelicts, criminals… therefore, they had armed themselves for their own protection.

With electric batons and tear gas.

With wooden planks, craft knifes, and baseball bats.

But those things…

Couldn't help them at all.

"Hehe?"

There was a grade-schooler girl, so thin she might have accidentally disappeared into space. She was the abnormality these youths were facing. With her short hair tied up in two ponytails, she was a completely ordinary girl, cute and inconspicuous and wore sandals even in this chilling winter.

Only, she didn't have arms.

"Urk!"

A muscular boy heaved up a baseball bat with all his strength, but his blow was abnormally stopped mid-air. The boy gave out a mortified screech and tried to move the bat as hard as he could, but it remained unmovable as if held down by some unknown force.

In the next instant, five incredible dents – like that made by five fingers – appeared on the bat. Then, unbelievably, the bat became twisted and crumpled up.

“Hey – ho!”

With invisible fingers, Long-Armed Demon spent a while wringing the bat as if it were a tea towel.

“Boring!”

She tilted her head cutely and smashed the boy with her invisible hand. “Bam – “, the part of the boy’s head above the jaw flew off. His spraying blood and brain matter spattered everywhere, and he died instantly. Stumbling, he fell down while still tightly holding on the bat that had lost its shape.

Silence.

The five teenagers who saw this scene gave out sharp shrieks of despair.

There are very few opportunities to truly come into contact with ‘death’ in modern-day Japan. Corpses were quickly taken away and cremated, turning into dust in the blink of an eye. THe illusions of death, mimicked to such detail by video games and movies and manga, made true death no longer feel real. They took away those teenagers’ fear of death.

Therefore, true death was like magic for these teenagers; it was an abnormal phenomenon that they could not understand.

Traumatized, they sprinted away like mad.

“Noisy. You’re ruining this quiet night.”

Long-Armed Demon’s expression was evidently displeased, but then she discovered the only young girl among the teenagers. She finally found a young girl! The townspeople were more on guard nowadays, and Long-Armed Demon had found it hard to discover her target – the girl with the Apple.

She must find her soon.

Long-Armed Demon nodded to herself, and chased after the girl as she hoped her lucky day had finally come.

“Did I get it right? – Did I get it right? – ”

Then she stretched out her invisible arms.

“Ahhh!”

The girl’s ankles were suddenly caught by something, and she fell violently forward as her body lost its balance. Cigarettes and a lighter fell out of her pockets.

She was obviously not old enough to smoke; but she didn’t do anything that deserved to be slaughtered, either.

She was simply unfortunate.

She could only lament that her luck ran out. She happened to meet something that represented abnormality, happenstance, and death – a demon.

It was an uncanny scene.

“It’s so high – ”

An uncanny and cruel scene.

All four of the girl’s limbs were grasped by invisible arms, and she was lifted into the air with an irresistible force. The girl looked like she was freely floating in air, but in truth she had been robbed of all free movement and could only slightly shift her body. Her pupils were completely dilated with fear, and her teeth cluttered and grind.

While she was facing her fatal crisis, all the other teenagers had already run away. The girl despaired. So that was the truth – those people who gathered in this deserted building with her weren’t her family or friends, but only strangers who happened to have similar experiences. How could they possibly want to save her?!

When she understood this, the girl asked for help from someone she had not even considered a possibility.

“Hel, help me… Dad, Mom…”

Her parents, whom she had thought she no longer cared about and were only bound to her through blood; her annoying parents, whom she had once thought only existed to provide her with three meals a day and pocket money, and whom she thought would be better off

without personalities.

“Help me – Dad, Mom!”

The only time she desired her parents to save her is when she reached this helpless end.

“Hehehe, Long-Armed Demon feels a little like having a dejanew.”

Saying those cryptic words, Long-Armed Demon tilted her head.

“Huh?! No, that’s not it. Dejanew – what was it again? DEIYtop? No… Deja vecu? Whatever – Onee-chan, you’re very similar to how Long-Armed Demon was before.”

Deja vecu wasn’t correct either. A reminiscing expression surfaced on Long-Armed Demon’s face.

“But there won’t be a savior appearing! There are no Gods, no heroes, and no princes on white horses who can save us in a pinch. Because had God truly existed…

There was a small, tearing sound.

“… Then I, Long-Armed Demon, shouldn’t have become a demon.”

The girl’s arms were torn off. With the tearing sound, the external force twisted apart the girl’s flesh, bones, fat and veins. Her two arms fell away from her body. The dim deserted building was saturated with an unbelievably large amount of blood, and her sharp and shrill screams.

“AHH – AHHHHH. AHHHHH –”

The girl’s eyes rolled upwards with pain, as if she had lost consciousness. That was understandable. After all, her arms were torn off while she was still alive and conscious. The fact that she hadn’t gone into shock was incredible enough.

“An insect…”

Long-Armed Demon’s expression didn’t change. Even as she faced this cruel scene that she had created, she still had an innocent appearance.

“I want to break its legs as soon as I find an insect. Isn’t that right? A kid would want to tear off its wings, yank off its antennae, and

cut apart its body, right? Long-Armed Demon was such a kid, and probably – no, I definitely did not grow up any more from that point onwards."

Tearing, tearing.

Then, the girl's legs were also torn off without much ado.

"But that's alright, because Zeki-kun accepted Long-Armed Demon as who she is."

Long-Armed Demon muttered to the girl, who had already died from the pain or the blood loss.

"So I can simply be Long-Armed Demon. I can be a demon who can kill humans like insects, a demon with no heart."

Long-Armed Demon discarded the girl's corpse. "Another miss?" She sighed.

"I hate those weak humans who only know how to wait for God; I hate those pathetic humans who only know how to wait for a hero. I don't want to be a human. I just want to be a Long-Armed Demon serving beside a fallen angel."

With an innocent and empty smile, she yelled out loud: "How was that? Aren't Long-Armed Demon's arms very very long?"

Kannonsakazaki Private High School was an ordinary school located in a remote township. Thanks to the school's culture and traditions, all the students were well-mannered and relaxed and therefore had a good reputation. The four school buildings were loosely scattered across the school grounds, and the inconvenient distance between them was rather annoying. Moreover, as the school was established a long time ago, the remains of ancient graffiti were everywhere in the buildings.

It was a place where a cool breeze often blew past and emanated an anachronistic atmosphere.

The second-oldest building was Building Two. The room at the end of the second-storey corridor was for Class B, Year One, taught by a teacher named Sakaki Guryū who was very incongruous with this ordinary school. Since the students here always cleaned the rooms

diligently, the school buildings did not seem dilapidated despite their age.

It was the time to go home. The afterschool bell was ringing loudly, and Rinne poked Guriko, who was dead asleep.

For some reason, Guriko was always sleeping at school these days. That was Guriko's hobby. In other words, her special ability. There really wasn't anything anyone could do about it. However, she didn't sleep in class as frequently as before since she started living with Rinne.

Was it because she was tired from that weird 'training program'? Rinne didn't know a lot about what the training involved. She just felt that Guriko must have worked very hard. At least, she'll try not to bother Guriko, who was trying her best, and make sure she didn't have to worry excessively.

Rinne lived like a zombie for a while after Katsumi's death.

Time had flown away so mercilessly.

According to witness accounts, the murderer labelled 'Long-Armed Demon' had killed ten people already, and all of them were girls of Rinne's age. Ten people. Numbers were always empty. They carried no emotions.

Though she would not die due to the Apple's power, Rinne was still scared. She emphasized with those who were killed, and wished they would catch the criminal soon.

"…"

Then she remembered Katsumi, that girl who was willing to be friends with her. She remembered those youthful memories they created together, and the funeral that left a deep shadow in her heart. Katsumi's parents were crying, her younger brother was crying, and Rinne also kept crying. The heavy atmosphere, vague with tears, was locked within Rinne's heart, unable to be digested away.

She remembered Katsumi's face that she saw last, a face that had a lonely smile.

"It'll be my treat next time."

“Treat to what?”

“Ahh!”

Guriko was already awake. It seemed that Rinne, lost in her thoughts, didn’t notice it. With a tired expression, Guriko scratched at her unique wolf-like hair cut and moved closer to stare at Rinne’s tear-filled eyes.

Guriko’s eyes were pitch-black like gun-barrels. They had no emotions and did not speak. They were dark as if sucking everything into them. However, now something close to gentleness seemed to have mixed into it.

Guriko pretended not to notice Rinne’s tears. She stood up and stretched.

“Ahh, I’m so sleepy… I never seem to get enough sleep.”

“Have you been staying up lately, Guriko-chan?”

Immortals like Guriko didn’t particularly have a desire to sleep. Guriko only treated sleep as a hobby, so she slept for about the same length of time as a normal human.

She took the school bag on the table and replied nonechalantly: “Yeah, I’m looking for the Long-Armed Demon.”

Rinne’s heart almost stopped with fear when she heard this.

“Long-Armed Demon… you mean that murderer?”

“Yep. That person seemed to only act at night, so I go out at night and stroll around a bit. I just haven’t found him yet.”

Rinne paled. It was simply far too dangerous. She knew how powerful Guriko was; Guriko can easily defeat an ordinary Mushi. However, for some reason, she still didn’t want Guriko to do anything too dangerous, especially when the opponent is an unknown murderer.

A rare, gentle smile surfaced on Guriko’s face as if she read Rinne’s expressions.

“Don’t worry. Besides, fighting is the only thing I know.”

She muttered.

“I won’t let the Long-Armed Demon kill you or Sakaki, or Kio and Hino and these people at school.”

As if she just realized something, Guriko said with a weaker voice and a face full of embarrassment: “Kio and Hino – I probably shouldn’t worry about them. They invade my bedroom every night, reading bedtime stories and singing lullabies. It’s quite ridiculous, especially when I’m older than them… seriously, do they have no manners, or do they simply not understand shame?”

Rinne felt this was quite incredulous, and she tilted her head as she looked like Guriko, who was mumbling to herself.

Guriko startled herself with realization again, and shook her head.

“N-never mind. Dammit, I can’t control my emotions…”

Then she rushed out of the classroom. Though Rinne was confused and didn’t know what to do, she still chased after Guriko.

Since Guriko said she wanted to go shopping after school, Rinne went with her. Rinne wasn’t working on that day. January was quickly drawing to an end. The sun speedily disappeared beneath the horizon, and the shops painted with the shade of dusk held a nameless sense of melancholy.

Rinne felt just how much she relied on Guriko when she parted with her for only three weeks. She owned that home, but it was Guriko who protected that home. Rinne despised such a life, a life where she was always reliant on someone else and lived under someone else’s protection.

Sakaki, Guriko, and Katsumi; Rinne was used to relying on others because there were so many people around her who gently protected her. She felt she owed them, and that she needed to grow stronger little by little.

Was it inevitable? The shops, which were usually cluttered with students after school, were now rather desolate. The Long-Armed Demon was the murderer that appeared in Kannonsakazaki at the beginning of January. It had already killed ten people in less than a month.

It was thought that there was only one common thing among all victims: they were all young girls.

But then, the news pointed out a few days ago that wayward boys and male police officers were also counted among the victims.

It had been explained that the officers were killed when they discovered the Long-Armed Demon and attempted to arrest the culprit – but that explanation did not work for the boys.

However, they were only rare exceptions. The main targets were high-school girls. Girls of Rinne's age were most scared of the Long-Armed Demon. In fact, apart from Rinne and Guriko, the majority of the girls chose not to go school. They probably thought they might be killed by the Long-Armed Demon if they left their houses, and they either voluntarily took days off or were forced to stay home by their parents. There were even those who indicated they'd like to leave this place until things calmed down, and had left for the countryside. After all, the Long-Armed Demon only killed in the township of Kannonsakazaki, and leaving it would be a wise way to stay alive.

The Long-Armed Demon had therefore stirred up a mighty ripple in Kannonsakazaki's formerly calm atmosphere.

TV stations, news reporters, and various media had all swarmed into town for the past few days. Those curious onlookers were also roaming around and taking pictures. Inky bloodstains still remained at the murder scenes that the police hadn't cleaned in time, and officers dressed in their navy blue uniform patrolled those places day and night.

Since she felt uneasy when she was alone, Rinne slept and ate with the big-sister-figure young lady next door now. Though it wasn't helping much, it was better than being anxious on her own. She kept going to school, not because she wasn't scared, but because she was immortal. She still felt, more or less, that she would not be killed though she still retained the sense of pain.

That was completely different from Guriko's confidence, her belief that she will not lose to the Long-Armed Demon, and her complete lack of fear towards the murderer.

Ahh, I hate this feeling. Rinne thought to herself. She was weak. She was so weak.

She owed Katsumi. Katsumi often worried about Rinne; wouldn't she find it hard to leave for Heaven then?

“Sorry for the wait.”

Guriko poked her head out of the make-up shop and looked emotionlessly towards Rinne, all the while holding on to a small paper bag.

“Ah, right.” Rinne, who was lost in her thoughts and was startled, blinked at Guriko: “What did you buy?”

“Not sure.”

Well, that only made Rinne more confused.

Guriko placed the paper bag into her school bag with a smile: “But it’s really pretty.”

“That’s so rare! Guriko-chan bought something!”

Did this mean Guriko was beginning to change? The goal of that training seemed to be making Guriko into an ordinary high-school student. If that was the case, then that training was already having some good results, wasn’t it?

However, Guriko pouted when Rinne said this.

“Shut it. It’s because Hino’s birthday is coming up.”

“Hino?”

Rinne’s face was full of confusion. Guriko blushed and rushed forward. Startled, Rinne quickly caught up with her. Recently, Guriko often behaved in this manner. Though Rinne liked Guriko showing her human emotions, Rinne rarely understood the reasons behind it and often felt Guriko was leaving her behind.

“I know, t-this is really unlike me. But that’s because she was literally telling me with her eyes, telling me to buy something for her. It’s Hino’s fault anyways, suddenly talking about her birthday. I knew what she meant as soon as I heard it. Er – it’s not like I regard them as parents. Just that, um, they do take care of me and all –”

“What?”

She couldn’t understand what Guriko was saying at all.

When they reached a cafe among the shops, Rinne suddenly had a thought and pulled on Guriko’s clothes to stop her from walking

forward. Like a puppy that had its leash pulled taut, Guriko whimpered and stopped.

“What?”

Guriko looked dubiously over at Rinne. Rinne couldn’t help but feel that Guriko’s expression was very cute. She patted Guriko’s head and pointed at the cafe with a gentle smile: “Let’s go in.”

“What? Why?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just go in.”

Rinne opened the cafe doors without explaining. This was the cafe where she saw Katsumi last. It was an anachronistic cafe named ‘Indian Bar’, and the inside always seemed rather dim.

Guriko was changing. Rinne wanted to know the reason behind it. They were friends – no, that was not exactly correct. However, as long as she understood Guriko’s viewpoint, then Rinne can at least be someone Guriko can talk to when distressed, right? Rinne wanted to help Guriko.

She saved me a month ago.

Then she had also healed mine and Sakaki’s lonely hearts.

And, most importantly, I want to love Guriko from the bottom of my heart, to love Guriko with the intensity that Katsumi had missed out on.

“Ding dong.”

The bells tied to the door of the cafe emitted a crisp sound.

“Welcome.”

The young owner approached them with a run and a big smile, but Rinne couldn’t bring herself to reply to her immediately. That was because a very strange person was sitting on a seat in front of her towards the right.

Rinne was a little startled.

It was a male, and his true height could not be seen due to his bad posture. His slightly long hair covered the majority of his face, and she could only barely see his wide-open eyes that were emitting a golden light. He was dressed in a worn-out coat, slowly breathing

out the smoke of a cheap cigarette, and wore a pair of sport shoes. For some reason, out of everything that was on him, only those shoes were of the latest fashion.

- A hair demon.

Rinne instinctively thought that. His hair was not particularly long, but the unkempt fringe covered his entire face and made his expression invisible, giving out the feeling of a lack of humanity. Moreover, he was sitting in an odd pose. For some reason, he was sitting cross-legged in the chair with his neck cocked to one side as if he was a strange puppet. He maintained that pose, and did not move apart from reaching out his hand to tap his cigarette ash into the ashtray.

There were no other customers in the shop apart from him. It seemed like the townsfolk didn't wander around after work anymore due to the presence of the Long-Armed Demon, and all chose to go straight home.

"That customer," maintaining her smile, the owner said quietly without moving her lips too much, "seems to be a detective."

"A detective?"

She couldn't tell that. A detective was a police officer responsible for catching criminals. But… that man looks more like a criminal himself. However, as a detective, he was probably looking for the Long-Armed Demon as well. Shouldn't detectives move about in pairs? Rinne thought of this based on the vague information she learnt from TV.

The owner then said with a voice as gentle as a soft song: "Hmm, so we shouldn't disrupt him."

"I see."

Rinne nodded. As she turned away from the owner, she heard a soft voice beside her ears.

"This is lonely. I can't hear Katsumi's voice anymore."

Did she remember the faces of all the guests who came into her shop?

"So lonely. Classic music is too lonely."

The owner changed to another CD, a jazz piece that was full of energy. Tears kept swelling up in Rinne's eyes. She didn't look at the owner and sat down at a table with Guriko. The shop was not big, and they sat only one table away from the odd man who was apparently a detective.

Rinne gave him one glance and realized he was gazing at the ceiling with an empty look in his eyes, apparently deep in thought. She decided not to bother him, and moved her eyes to the menu instead. Feeling rather cold, she ordered a cup of hot coffee.

Rinne still retained some feelings toward temperature. Guriko mumbled "hot chocolate", then added "to stay awake" as if she was defending herself.

There wasn't much caffeine in hot chocolate. Rinne knew the that. Guriko's sense of taste could only come alive when she was eating or drinking something sweet.

The owner nodded after taking down their orders. Rinne then looked at Guriko, who was sitting very straight in her chair and had an emotionless countenance.

"A lot has been going on. It feels very restless."

"That's true, but I don't feel bothered about this oppressive feeling." Guriko stared straight at Rinne, her barrel-like eyes pitch-black as ever. "It was painful to keep living those mediocre and listless days. It was very painful, especially since I have lived such a life for hundreds of years. Though I like those peaceful days when nothing ever happens, I am also very scared of them."

Guriko took out a spoon in the blink of an eye, and stared calmly at it: "They make me want to find and kill Mushi."

Rinne drew an inward breath. Guriko smiled.

"The reason that I opposed Mushi… indeed, a large part of it was to find something to do with my time. Though I do want to avenge my family, such hatred or spite won't last for a thousand years. Chances are I'm only killing Mushi to get rid of my boredom."

Rinne didn't think so. Guriko was fighting for the Apple holders who have been targeted by Mushi. If she was just killing time, she couldn't possibly have kept at it for a millennium. A strong sense of 'duty' was required to be continuously committed to something like

this, whereas sheer boredom would normally not have kept up.

Guriko lowered her head a little.

“However, I’ve come to dislike those interesting – or rather, tumultuous – days. I began to be afraid that our ordinary lives may be disrupted.”

“I’ve become weaker” – she said through gritted teeth. Rinne didn’t think so. Compared to the person Guriko was when they first met – that girl who had nothing, sought nothing, and only lived like a machine and a monster – a willpower tenfold more powerful now sparkled in Guriko’s eyes.

As if speaking to herself, Guriko spoke while she gazed at the sparkling silver spoon.

“Rinne, did I change back into a human?”

She became weak and began to fear losing things important to her.

However, she now had a heart, and could seriously consider others.

Did she become such a human –

“The world is too full of melancholic things.”

Suddenly, she felt like a blunt knife brushed past her back – it was the voice of a man.

Turning her head, she realized the odd detective was standing next to Rinne’s and her table. He still didn’t look like a human upon close inspection. He had short stubble around his mouth and he was looking at a vague spot that was neither Rinne or Guriko. Tilting his head, he continued: “And that’s especially true for this town. It’s too full of it.”

“What do you want?”

Guriko asked brusquely. “Gigigi,” the detective laughed emotionlessly, his shoulders shaking. “Sorry. I’m not some suspect. It’s just how I am.”

The detective then took out his police ID to show them. Despite his gloomy looks which wouldn’t be out of place even if he turned out to be secretly re-developing Frankenstein, it seemed he really was a detective.

However, the photo printed in the ID was completely different from his person. In other words, it was the picture of an incredibly handsome man. So does that meant his looks would definitely improve if he fixed his hair – or did that mean it was actually someone else's photo?

The ends of this incredible detective's lips turned upward: "I'm a detective – the name is Nageki Kurukiyo, specializing in homicides."

"Nageki Kurukiyo." Guriko furrowed her brows: "What a savage name."

He probably wouldn't want someone called "Eguriko" to say this about his name.

Guriko showed no fear to his odd appearances and asked with a threatening tone: "So, what does Nageki Kurukiyo want with us?"

"Oh dear, how straightforward."

"Gigigi," Nageki laughed loudly with his unnatural laugh. While they talked, the shop owner arrived with coffee and hot chocolate. She looked worriedly at Nageki, but he was unmoved with her gaze, and even explained the situation to her a little.

Then he sat down next to Rinne without asking her permission. It was a square table made for four people. Startled, Rinne unconsciously shrank away from him. Meanwhile, Guriko glared at Nageki with a look full of hostility: "I said, what do you want with us?"

"Oh my, gigigi, please don't give me such a scary look. Such a waste of your pretty face. Oh, your expression is getting more and more scary!"

After those completely meaningless words, his expression suddenly became serious: "Anyways, do you know about the killer called Long-Armed Demon?"

"We don't. Hurry up and disappear."

As if pleased, Nageki looked at Guriko, whose tone was getting rather sour. "Lying is bad. Gigi, do you find me annoying? I'm

honored. It's not like I set out to be the good cop loved by all. After all, there shouldn't be a single person in Kannonsakazaki who doesn't know about the Long-Armed Demon."

Then don't bother to ask about it! Rinne thought as she kept her head low and sipped at her coffee. In contrast to Nageki's dirty looks, this man didn't smell too bad and even had some rather pleasant cologne on. It wasn't uncomfortable sitting next to him. Was his appearance only a fashion trend? Was he actually a keen follower of pioneering fashion tastes?

"I think we'll never catch the Long-Armed Demon this way."

With an incredulous tone, Nageki went on: "Everyone is being so obstinate. Honesty, they'd rather believe senseless guesses such as the criminal being a few giants or having super-powerful weapons, but are willing to ignore the witnesses' words about how a little girl was the killer. They discounted that evidence as 'impossible'. How's that so? That's the incomprehensible part. There are so many cops here, but none of them paid that evidence any attention. What a bother!"

"Stop ranting to us. You're getting more annoying. Get out." A murderous light was being emitted from Guriko's eyes.

"Don't say that."

Nageki was unmoved. He must be a pretty tough man to stand his ground when Guriko was staring at him seriously; Rinne was certain of that. This detective was much more than just weird.

"Well, ladies, please humor this lonely man's desire to chat. Most witnesses for this case verified that a girl of grade school age appeared at many crime scenes. If she walked away alive from all of them, then she's probably the criminal, right? The question is – can a grade school student shatter a human body to that degree?"

Practically speaking, it was impossible. Though the victims were often thin high school girls, how could a grade-schooler push them against walls or the ground and kill them thus? There were also victims whose limbs were pulled off their bodies. Even adults would find that hard to accomplish without using tools.

But Rinne knew the truth.

Humans were not the only beings living in this world.

“But I knew it.”

As if he read Rinne’s mind, Nageki said softly: “I saw an enormous monster a month ago. I also saw a human who looked like a girl fighting that monster.”

Guriko’s eyebrows twitched once. She tried her best to keep a nonchalant appearance, trying to hide that expression. She didn’t know if that pretense will work against Nageki, who was certainly a man to be feared. A monster, an enormous monster – that was Guriko’s opponent in the incident a month ago. The girl Nageki saw was definitely Guriko.

She didn’t know whether Nageki discovered this.

“Therefore I was certain the world is too full of melancholic things. There were so many incomprehensible things, enough to make people feel melancholic. I’ve been very melancholic since that day. Once I realized the existence of a world that humans cannot comprehend, I felt the job of a policeman too foolish to be continued. After all, beings that ignore morality, law, and common sense exist with us.”

The melancholic officer smiled ominously. His expression was too profound, and Rinne couldn’t read it. Guriko also remained silent. The low sounds of a jazz rhythm permeated throughout the cafe.

Calmly, Nageki declared: “The information I had personally gathered shows there is a desolate graveyard close to this cafe and next to the shrine. Many rumors indicated a girl looking like the Long-Armed Demon had been seen there. I’m going to go there next. Police usually don’t actively investigate about rumors. However, as long as it is investigated thoroughly, there are bound to be some traces. I may even find the Long-Armed Demon herself.”

Then he plonked a voice recorder on the table and smoothly pressed the ‘stop’ button. Facing the bewildered duo before him, he continued without a pause: “I have recorded everything I’ve just said. I hope you can deliver this to the Kannonsakazaki police station – although it may be problematic for you. If I am killed, it shows I was correct. With this, the other policemen should be able to find out the truth of the matter at once.”

“What are you talking about?”

Guriko was very puzzled, and Rinne's face turned ashen grey. So that was why Nageki started to chat with them. He wanted to catch the Long-Armed Demon. He wanted everyone to know that the Long-Armed Demon was the girl witnesses spoke of and he wanted, more than everything else, to quickly end this cruel homicide case.

"But I don't plan to die."

Nageki stood up gently and walked toward the cashier to pay. Then he wobbled, mindlessly and ominously, and muttered: "Honestly, this world – is too full of melancholic things."

Guriko soon made up her mind. She gave the bill to Rinne and told her not to follow, then quickly chased after Nageki. Nageki was weird, but he was only a mortal. If that Long-Armed Demon was not a human but a monster, then he may really be killed.

She wasn't sympathetic to Nageki; he wasn't even her friend. However, if Nageki's analysis was correct and the Long-Armed Demon was in the graveyard, then Guriko must face her in battle. As a fellow monster, she was the only one who can defeat her.

Humans cannot win against monsters.

So I must kill her.

She walked along the road that was dirtied with mud, dust, and tire marks. She ran into the shrine that never had any visitors. She passed through the gate, went up the stone steps, walked around the donation box. The graveyard lay before her. The dry sand sprayed itself up into the cold wintry air. Guriko arrived deep within the shrine complex, and jumped lightly over the rusty railing. Uneven rows of moss-covered headstones greeted her as she landed.

Insects were flying aimlessly in the air.

"Dong," the bell in the shrine sounded.

"What are you doing?"

Guriko asked in a low voice. She looked at Nageki, who was crawling between the headstones with his face close to the ground, crawling as if he was an ant that landed on top of an ice cream. His cheap jacket was already dirtied with mud.

She followed him rather quickly and even took shortcuts in the shrine, but he still got here before her. Nageki probably got here on a bicycle or a motorbike. He just has to be problematic at the oddest times. This man would be a hindrance during her fight with the Long-Armed Demon, so she had hoped to get here before him.

Nageki didn't even look at Guriko, and only stared carefully at the ground: "You're here. I knew you'd come."

Nageki's voice was like a dispassionate whisper. Hearing this, Guriko furrowed her brows.

Damn this guy.

"You were the one who fought the monster in the incident a month ago, right?"

"What of it?"

Guriko didn't hide it and answered it straightaway. Nageki laughed his strange laugh, and slowly crawled along the ground. Guriko approached him slowly, but was immediately warned away by him when she stood next to him.

"Please don't stand there. You'll make the tracks disappear."

"Tracks?"

"Yes, the Long-Armed Demon's tracks."

Nageki was silent for a long time, then he slowly stood up. Though he crouched while standing, he was still much taller than Guriko. By the way, Guriko was one of the shorter kids in her class. She can certainly use the Apple's power to grow taller, but it would be such a foolish waste. Yes, an Apple has the power to twist cause and effect and create miracles. Once she uses the power of the Apples to their greatest potential, Guriko can obtain unimaginable strength in battle.

The Long-Armed Demon's battle prowess, which murdered humans as if they were toys, can also be something similar. Though Guriko didn't think so – but could she be another Apple holder? That's certainly possible. But in all honesty, her way of killing was far too cruel. If she was another Apple holder, then she must be more of a monster than Guriko.

“What did you mean, tracks?”

“Hmm, we can call it – evidence to ascertain the Long-Armed Demon’s current location. In real cases, we can sometimes find fingerprints or hair. But this time I found something simpler!”

He didn’t keep talking, but walked firmly away in one direction. Guriko hurried to follow: “What did you find?”

“Foot prints.” Nageki, whose gait made him look like he had no spine, explained in an even voice: “I found some cute sandal foot prints that looked like they belong to a grade school girl. Witnesses also said the Long-Armed Demon was wearing sandals. It’s winter right now, so there’s a high chance we’ve hit jackpot. Thankfully, the ground was wet and it was easy to find the foot prints. Speaking of, it was just raining yesterday.”

“…”

Guriko looked silently at Nageki. He kept his neck bent as if he had some anatomical problems, and he seemed gloomy all over. She still couldn’t discern his real motive. However, the reasons for his actions were enough to be considered justice. He didn’t seem to be a useless detective, after all.

However, the Long-Armed Demon had left foot prints, and was seen by many people. It seriously didn’t look like she was avoiding the police. Was it because she was confident of her powers against the police? Or was it simply because she was careless?

Guriko shook her head. That wasn’t important. Right now, a girl – or rather, a monster – who was the culprit of ten killings was waiting for her. If Guriko let her guard down, she could be the next victim.

It has been a long time since Guriko felt this way.

She had temporarily forgotten the tension before the kill and the dry, barren feeling of battle.

She kept walking forward, keeping her guard up. The two of them soon arrived at their destination.

It was a simple place before a simple headstone. The moss-covered headstone couldn’t be missed. It was a beautifully polished limestone work standing in this graveyard. There was nothing

unique about the gravestone, except the words ‘the Aizawa Family’ and a family crest consisting of a plum blossom.

Some wild flowers were placed before the headstone, mingled with dirt. They were flowers that bloomed even in winter, plants that could easily be regarded as weeds. Also, there were somehow cans of beer and red-bean buns, a blanket and –

A little girl with no arms.

“Found you.” Nageki muttered: “Honestly – ”

The girl was sleeping soundly, breathing cutely like a little baby. Her expression was soft and calm, as if she was dreaming sweet dreams. However, the more ordinary she looked, the more incongruous she felt. She was sleeping right before the headstone of a dead man.

“Is she – ”

Was this thin girl –

“ – the Long-Armed Demon?”

The Long-Armed Demon, the murderer who had killed ten people and spread fear throughout Kannonsakazaki – appeared to be only a little girl without arms.

Of course, she did not look as strong as a terrifying monster.

However –

“Hey, you…”

While Guriko was thinking, Nageki stretched his hands towards the Long-Armed Demon. He probably let down his guard because the opponent looked too harmless. That won’t do; they must tie her up while she’s sleeping. Wait, no, a police officer can’t just do something like that.

Damn, Nageki never planned to kill her. Too naive; he was too naive.

If you do not kill a monster, then you will be killed.

“Bam.”

In the next moment, Long-Armed Demon savagely opened her eyes.

“Who is it? Long-Armed Demon is sleepy!”

Then – up high, up high.

Nageki Kurukiyo was propelled into the air by an invisible force, and literally flew off. It was so powerful that Guriko thought something had exploded. Nageki didn’t even have the chance to scream before he smashed into a few headstones and smacked into the ground.

Guriko switched her brain to battle mode, and glared at Long-Armed Demon who was sleepily rubbing away at her eyes. What just happened? She couldn’t see the source of the attack. It was different from something that was too fast to be seen; instead, Nageki was simply beaten by something invisible.

Long-Armed Demon didn’t even look at Nageki’s direction and just gave a big yawn: “Mmm, mmmmm… Long-Armed Demon works so hard during the night, and gets so tired! At least let me sleep while the day lasts. Honestly – hurry up and say bye-bye!”

The invisible attack moved towards Guriko this time. She originally planned to dodge the attack from the movement of the wind even if she couldn’t see it, but she didn’t detect any shift in the air at all. What was this?

“Urgh!”

Having observed how Nageki was beaten, Guriko judged the opponent would aim at her face and crossed her arms to block Long-Armed Demon’s attack. It was heavy, as if someone just hurled a boulder at her. Right, if such an attack was repeated over and over, the human body would easily be damaged.

No mistake. This was the Long-Armed Demon who killed ten people!

Listening to the grating of her own bones, Guriko withstood this impact. She leapt up and stood on top of a headstone, then she drew out her spoons from the pocket of her uniform and threw them at Long-Armed Demon with lightning speed.

“Woah?!”

Perhaps instinctively detecting the danger. Long-Armed Demon straightened her sleepy face and jumped up. She twirled as she leapt backwards, and landed on top of a headstone just like Guriko did. Cold sweat was appearing on her face, and she looked stunned.

Then – the two monsters, Gankyū Eguriko and Long-Armed Demon, finally stood face to face.

“Huh? Wait, wait a minute.”

With doubt in her voice, Long-Armed Demon asked for a pause. She then put on a solemn expression as if deep in thought: “Eh, eh eh, no way. Um, that’s not how she looks. You’re not who Long-Armed Demon is looking for. Did Long-Armed Demon get it wrong? Did I remember it wrong… I feel like I keep saying this over and over.”

Having completed this senseless soliloquy, Long-Armed Demon asked: “What’s your name?”

“Gankyū Eguriko.”

Though she considered giving the name ‘Itsuwara Eguriko”, she decided against it. It was not like that name was any better. Guriko looked at Nageki as she thought of this. Though he suffered a strong impact, it wasn’t fatal. He’ll get by even if she left him alone, but he really did something stupid this time! He woke up the sleeping demon!

“Are you the Long-Armed Demon?” Guriko asked while holding a new spoon.

Long-Armed Demon grinned before replying. “Yep, I am Long-Armed Demon, with long long arms… huh? Gankyū-san, why are you so strong? Long-Armed Demon is a bit surprised!”

“I don’t need to explain that to you.”

Guriko couldn’t be bothered. Although Long-Armed Demon was smiling, murderous intent was emanating out of her entire body. If she were to disregard that feeling and keep on talking, Guriko would probably be struck down. Long-Armed Demon was undoubtedly an opponent that required all her strength. Guriko tensed, and asked only one question.

“You said you’re looking for someone. Why?”

“Oh, you wanna know?”

Naively, Long-Armed Demon easily told it to Guriko. “Long-Armed Demon must, um… must kill someone called Uzagawa Rine!”

“Who’s that?”

“I can’t find her!”

Long-Armed Demon said with disappointment, then suddenly asked with an intent look in her eyes. “Oh! Hey, Gankyū-san, could it be you also have an Apple?”

She didn’t mean ordinary apples, but the Apples of Eden that could give a human immortality and power to achieve miracles. Since she knew about the Apple – did that mean she was also an Apple holder? If that was the case, Guriko hoped to avoid mutual slaughter as much as possible. After all, they were sisters who fell into the same hell. Moreover, they couldn’t even die, so there was nothing to be gained from fighting each other.

There was, however, only one possible solution: to ‘take the other’s Apple’.

The moment the Apple holder gave up on her right to the Apple, she would lose it. Therefore, in order to defeat an Apple holder, one must torture and threaten and use all methods imaginable to take another’s Apple. Someone had slyly used this trick a month ago, and Guriko and Rinne had suffered enough because of it.

Guriko nodded guardedly, and continued to interrogate her: “Yes, I’m an Apple holder, are you also – ?”

“Wow, lucky!” Long-Armed Demon interrupted Guriko, and jumped up and down on top of the headstone: “Then, then please give your Apple to Long-Armed Demon! Zeki-kun wants that Rine person’s Apple, but you can’t tell one Apple apart from another. Even if I give him the Apple I get from you, Zeki-kun would never be able to tell!”

“That’s enough.”

This extremely naive speech rattled Guriko before she got the chance to feel afraid. However, Long-Armed Demon didn’t care. She jumped with a smile, and yelled passionately: “Give it to me! Long-Armed Demon wants it!”

The headstone shattered. Guriko leapt up in the blink of an eye and dodged the invisible arm. The hard rock behind her was smashed into smithereens. Just how powerful was she? If this thing – if it landed squarely on someone's body, it would be enough to send flesh flying.

Guriko jumped among the scattered headstones. Every time she jumped, the headstones around her were smashed with those invisible arms.

"Hey, stop dodging!" Long-Armed Demon puffed out her cheeks, and controlled her invisible arms without moving her body.

"But – you can't escape from me! What if I do this?"

As she spoke, a few headstones were simultaneously uprooted, and were thrown at Guriko like a judgement from heaven.

It was an overpowering weight that Guriko wouldn't dream of handling with her spoons, but she kept her composure.

"Enough gloating."

"Slam!"

She moved with incredible agility.

It was a conglomerate of dust, mud, and dark headstones.

Guriko put strength into her legs and jumped upward. She reached one headstone, then leapt swiftly onto the second one, then the third, using the headstones as stairs, leaping up faster and faster and towards Long-Armed Demon. The beauty of her movements was as enthralling as a dance.

"Wow. You're so impressive! This is so fun!"

Long-Armed Demon was neither stunned nor afraid. She was actually happy.

"Gankyū-san is so strong! Long-Armed Demon is excited!"

"You can die excited."

Guriko threw out her spoon with those cold words. The silver light swiftly sliced through the sky in a straight line.

However, the spoon was deflected by an invisible hand before reaching Long-Armed Demon, and landed with a small clank. Though it handled Mushi, it was far too weak for a monster. Guriko had such thoughts a month ago already.

But this was different.

The merciless personality that could only be restrained with a weapon as fragile as a spoon was released one month ago. Guriko had immediately turned into a terrifying monster. She became a monster who drew pleasure from killing, a monster who belonged to humanity in neither body nor soul.

That event made Guriko's millennium-old Apple disappear into nothingness. She shouldn't be able to change into such a monster anymore. However, even though the Apple disappeared, her strength – which should have decreased as well – remained unaltered within Guriko's body –

She didn't know what changes had occurred in her body.

She didn't know the truth behind the red monster that she metamorphosed into.

I think, that was – God – but why did I change into God's image then?

I don't know, because no one can answer this question anywhere.

Anyways, now I fight to protect the ordinary lives of Sakaki and Rinne, who had freed my heart.

The girl who died a thousand years ago thus lived on.

"Urgh!"

The invisible arm suddenly attacked from behind her on the left. Guriko didn't manage to keep her footing. A solid punch landed on her, and she fell down with a spin. She quickly stood up, licked the blood on her cracked lips, and furrowed her brows in thought.

The closer she was to Long-Armed Demon, the worse it became. The invisible attacks were like bullets; it was too late to dodge once they had already been fired. She could only predict them from the opponent's movements and line of sight before the attack initiates. However, that was very difficult to do in close quarters. The opponent seemed naive, but was actually rather difficult to fight.

Even if she wanted to use ranged attacks, her spoons would just be easily brushed away. If she could at least throw some headstones like what Long-Armed Demon had been doing –

She suddenly realized something.

This should be worth trying.

“Hey hey! I’m gonna kill you if you keep spacing out!”

With a happy expression on her face, Long-Armed Demon stretched her invisible fists toward Guriko. Guriko leapt backwards to dodge it and grabbed a small headstone. Though she was still cautious about using weapons apart from spoons, this was not the time to have such doubts. Guriko stood with her legs apart as she endured the slimy touch of the moss and lichen.

Despite appearances, she was very confident about her upper body strength.

However – aaaah, the headstone didn’t even move an inch. Long-Armed Demon could easily move the headstone, why? As she thought of this, Long-Armed Demon’s attack flew toward her, and Guriko had to move away.

Am I really physically weaker than Long-Armed Demon?! Such a headstone could be shattered with enough force, but Guriko was simply unable to uproot it from the ground and throw it.

And there was one more incredulous thing.

Long-Armed Demon was evidently controlling more than two arms. She needed at least two arms to pull out a headstone, but she was throwing four or five headstones at once. That meant – there were more than two invisible arms attached to Long-Armed Demon. She should probably have at least ten arms.

Guriko stared at Long-Armed Demon. Missing her arms – if others were fooled by her appearance and thought she only had twi invisible arms, then defeat would become certain.

Her ability seemed to be more complex than just controlling invisible long arms.

“Let’s test this.”

Guriko muttered as she stood in the middle of the ruined graveyard like a guardian, as if she was provoking Long-Armed Demon. If the shrine's high priest saw the graveyard in such a messy state, he'd probably hang himself. Guriko then put up a fearless expression, and waved at Long-Armed Demon.

"What's wrong, weren't you very proud of those arms? If this is the best you could do, then they're just invisible. That's not very impressive!"

Long-Armed Demon's left eyebrow twitched.

"You are looking down – looking down on me? You are looking down on L-L-Long-Armed Demon's – long arms?"

Long-Armed Demon was shaking. She was easily angered.

"Huh, Gankyū-san, I won't be soft on you anymore! Game over! Die!"

A torrential murderous intent rushed towards Guriko together with a scream. That was an aura completely incomparable with what was there beforehand. Guriko turned her torso in the blink of an eye, but she deliberately did not dodge too far away. She moved in small steps, and the rim of her uniform's skirt blew upwards due to the wind.

Instantly.

"Snap!"

Guriko felt an impact over her entire body the moment Long-Armed Demon gave that command.

"Argh!"

She moaned and frowned as she felt an ominous discomfort around her left foot. She tried to grasp the invisible arm that was holding her. The hand – even if there was no hand and only an arm – should be physically present.

However, Guriko's fingers passed through the area where the arm was supposed to be. There was only empty air.

"Ahahaha," Long-Armed Demon laughed shrilly: "You can't touch Long-Armed Demon's arms! Long-Armed Demon's arms are s-p-e-c-

i-a-l~~! Gankyū-san can't touch it, nor can Zeki-kun, or even Long-Armed Demon herself! They can only touch others! They are such invincible and pretty arms! So now you won't look down on it, right? You can honestly praise it now!"

Astonished, Guriko dodged behind a large headstone and checked the discomfort of her foot. It turned out the left foot was already fractured. Guriko had long lost the sensation of pain with her immortal body, and that would only be a disadvantage in battle. Pain was a signal to injury. If that signal wasn't felt, then she wouldn't know her limits.

If left alone, the power of the Apple should heal her bones. But it was unlikely to reach full recovery during this fight.

Guriko sighed and took off both her shoes and stockings, making it easier for her to move about.

In fact, when she still casually called herself 'Gankyū Eguriko', she always went barefoot. That made her steps solid on the ground and agile at the same time, and was best for such fights.

There were some bad swellings around the ends of her left tibia and fibula, which were broken by the Long-Armed Demon. Guriko used her stockings to tightly wrap around the fractured areas, and made some appropriate first-aid measure. But the best she could do was just to hold the broken bones in place.

"You can't hide!"

The headstone she was leaning against was instantly smashed. Gusts of dirt flew up into the air, and she couldn't see anything. Guriko shut her eyes to prevent the dirt from going into her eyes, and threw out a few spoons to keep Long-Armed Demon busy as she tried to think.

Though she didn't understand the basis and logic behind her opponent's power, she could roughly grasp its effects. But it was a foolish thing to ponder about the basis of a monster's abilities anyways. She didn't need academic evidence and she didn't need scientific theories; all she needed to know was what effect the power would cause.

Strictly speaking, Long-Armed Demon's ability was not 'invisible arms'.

If she had to describe it, it would be something like telekinesis – a supernatural power. She was able to create a force field with her thoughts and move objects. Apart from direct attacks such as smashing headstones and beating humans, she should also be able to accomplish ordinary movements – such as putting coins into a vending machine and opening cans – with ease. Seemed like she could do the same movements as a normal human's two hands.

Guriko thought about her enemy's tactics as she tried to dodge attacks while hopping on one foot.

The first plan she had was to escape to a distance where Long-Armed Demon couldn't reach. However, it'd be cruel to simply leave Nageki behind and escape by herself, and it wouldn't solve the problem. Then, she could only hope to divert the Long-Armed Demon's attention. She seemed a simple girl; Guriko just needed to make her unable to concentrate on using her arms.

But how?

Ironically, the situation took a worse turn for Guriko as she was thinking these things.

" _ "

She heard a very small sound.

She couldn't hear what was said. The sound was very very small.

This sound…

Guriko instinctively looked to its source, and shivered when she saw Usagawa Rinne standing there. She saw her gentle face, thin body, and the lovely ribbon decorating her hair.

"Rinne… why?"

How did this happen? This is so weird. I told her not to follow me. Rinne isn't a stupid girl; she should know she would only be problematic for me here. But why?

Did she become careless because she knew she couldn't die? – No, no way.

Rinne, why?

"Eh?" Long-Armed Demon finally noticed Rinne. Turning her head,

she stayed silent for a while, as if planning something. She soon decided carelessly: “I see. Hmm! She’s a bother, so let me kill her.”

Her voice sounded unnatural, but there wasn’t time to think –

“Rinne, run!”

Guriko yelled, and threw three spoons towards Long-Armed Demon. *Usagawa Rinne must not be in danger. I will protect her –*

I’ll show you that I can protect her, even if I must exchange my life for hers.

Therefore – although it was only for a moment – Guriko lost her composure in battle.

And Long-Armed Demon turned her head around during this gap – this worst possible moment.

“Shall we start with Gankyū-san?”

“Squeak.”

Guriko felt something odd around her neck the moment she heard a repulsive sound. It was a pressing feeling. Then she flew off into the sky within an unbelievable force – no, she was lifted up into the air by Long-Armed Demon’s invisible arms.

“Urgh – urgh – !”

Guriko’s neck was being strangled. She hung in the air, unable to move, still clutching her spoons. Damn, Guriko moaned. She was way too careless.

“How is it? Long-Armed Demon’s arms are strong, right? Is it painful? Do you want to die? Or should I say, I want to strangle you until you would rather die.”

She was strangled with a force that was just strong enough not to crush her bones. Her arteries and airway were both pressed by an invisible hand. Guriko screamed senselessly, trying to pull away those intangible arms, and clawed aimlessly at the air.

Guriko sought out Rinne’s figure through her murky sight, barely keeping control over her diminishing consciousness. There. Rinne

was standing motionlessly near the fountain at the entrance to the graveyard. She wasn't running away, nor did she seem scared. Only her shoulders were shaking slightly – shaking with laughter.

Why?

Why, Rinne?

As Guriko thought this – her conscious became dim.

Her conscious disappeared.

"Huh? That's boring." Long-Armed Demon lowered her head with boredom and looked at Guriko, whose limbs were hanging powerlessly downwards: "Now you know Long-Armed Demon is very very powerful, right? Because Long-Armed Demon won't ever lose to anyone apart from Zeki-kun. Hmm, but that was fun, Gankyū-san. I'll take my time to torture you until you give up your Apple!"

Guriko didn't answer.

At the end, even her fingertips fell limp.

Twirling, the spoons fell from the air.

Long-Armed Demon looked satisfactorily at her.

"Ahaha. Honestly, why would you use something like a spoon – "

"Why do you think?" It was a short and low sound.

That sound came from Guriko, who should have fainted.

"What?"

Long-Armed Demon's expression changed, but it was already too late.

The spoon fell downwards with a spin and reached Guriko's bare feet, instantly grasped by her toes. Then, using her intact right foot,

she swung forcefully to the right –

And she kicked forward with all her strength at that moment. The spoon flew forward – towards Long-Armed Demon's location.

"Eh – Ahhhhhhhhhh?!"

The spoon planted itself accurately into Long-Armed Demon's right eye before she had the time to react. Long-Armed Demon gave out a sharp cry. She stumbled backward, whether from pain or the impact, and fell struggling on the ground.

"Ahhhh! Woahhhh! It hurts, it hurts!"

Her invisible arms disappeared, perhaps due to her loss of concentration. Guriko was released, and she landed lightly on the ground. Then she instantly and mercilessly rushed up to Long-Armed Demon.

It was as she had thought. Long-Armed Demon lacked battle experience and easily fell for Guriko's faked death. She was too naive.

Guriko walked forward confidently once she ascertained her victory.

"You ask me why I'm using spoons? Of course that's to make gouging out eyeballs easier. Why do I want to gouge eyeballs? I have – forgotten that reason long ago."

"Um… Ahhhh! Ahhhh!" Long-Armed Demon finally stood up. She screamed as sanguineous tears flew down her cheek: "Wahhhh, ahhh! W-wait – it hurts, it hurts!"

Guriko grasped Long-Armed Demon's slender shoulder with her right hand, then her left fist punched powerfully at the spoon that was sticking out of Long-Armed Demon's eye.

"Squish – "

“AAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!”

The spoon sank into the eyeball, went through her brains, and came out from the back of her skull and fell on the ground covered with blood. Long-Armed Demon opened her mouth wide, then shut it, and stared incredulously at Guriko.

“ – Uuuuurgh.”

“You can’t die with just one?”

Guriko took out another spoon and sank it into Long-Armed Demon’s remaining left eye. With an experienced hand, she dug out the eyeball, and once again smashed the spoon into the hollow eye socket.

Blood – vitreous liquid – brain matters – and tears all spurted out. Long-Armed Demon lay on the ground motionless.

Holding the freshly-dug eyeball that still dribbled vitreous liquid with her fingertips, Guriko smiled.

It was an unconscious smile, one that was completely immersed in satisfaction.

The smile of a monster.

Tap, a footstep could be heard.

“ _ ”

Footsteps? An enemy? Long-Armed Demon’s companion?

Then he must be killed. He must be eliminated. She must kill, or she would be killed.

“ _ ”

Like a wild beast, Guriko turned around and prepared to throw a spoon towards the person standing behind her.

“Hehe.”

That laughter, clear as bells, recovered Guriko’s consciousness that had been burnt into ashes with battle fury. Guriko stiffened, and took another look at the person she was prepared to kill.

“Ahh…”

Guriko finally remembered – that Rinne was also here.

Rinne was standing there. She had wished to become ‘the most important person’ for Guriko, and Guriko considered her more important than anyone else.

Did she see – did she see that?

She really didn’t want her monstrous expression to be seen by Rinne. Be it that red appearance a month ago or the way she was gouging out eyeballs now – she just didn’t want Rinne to see that.

“Ah… Ah…” It was the thing she feared the most.

Just not Rinne.

Those things she shouldn’t do and those things that went through her mind.

Pointing at Rinne.

I pointed my spoons towards Rinne.

“Hehe.” Rinne was laughing: “Hehe – hm, I saw something nice. No

no, I definitely saw something good! If everything else goes smoothly till tonight, then today can be the best day in my career. No – rather, it'd be third best. Order doesn't matter. Anyways, I saw something good!"

She laughed evilly, a purely evil smile.

Evil?

Then she was not Rinne. Such a person was not Rinne.

"You…"

"What?" Rinne had an expression that seemed she only just discovered Guriko's presence: "Yo, long time no see."

She spoke these incomprehensible words. Guriko didn't know what to do. What did she mean, long time no see? They were just at a cafe moments ago. As Guriko thought this, Rinne laughed happily.

"You've changed. That's why I didn't recognize you. You're more beautiful now. Haha, and a mad light is hidden in your eyes. Great. You even seem charming now, excellent. And you're so cruel it's simply outstanding – ahaha. You were just a little girl, Yono, so what misfortunes fell upon you to make you like this? Well, though it was I who made these misfortunes happen – but this is an odd feeling, like discovering your bastard child is now a millionaire."

That name, Yono.

Guriko's expression changed, and she stared at this existence that had Rinne's face. She was sure of it. This thing was not Rinne, but some other ominous identity.

"Who are you?"

"Eh? Ahh, you couldn't recognize me because of this appearance?"

As she spoke, Rinne's body began to change. Her bones, muscles, and all body parts creaked shrilly as they changed and gradually lost their original appearance.

"Urk –"

Guriko couldn't help but moan as she watched the pitiful scene of her most important person twisting and writhing. Rinne's body gradually turned into one of a tall male.

The man was extremely tall, maybe even a head taller than Sakaki. However, he was not muscular. His long hair was tied into a complex pattern and hung behind him, and his appearance gave off a priest-like feel of solemnity and holiness. The priest's eyes, however, shone with a keen light like that of a wild wolf.

"But this isn't my real appearance either. Please excuse me. The scary Sterilization Disinfection is operating in the dark, so I don't want to expose my real appearance. Besides, I've used this look for the past few hundred years. I'm a bit attached to it." He walked towards Long-Armed Demon as he chatted: "Hehehe, Ume-chan got defeated. What a waste of the Apple I gave her. Dear little idiot. She forgot how her target looked, so she ended up committing serial murders. But that's what's so cute about her, hehe. How about we make your brain exercise as well next time? You're truly my best toy, my lovely Long-Armed Demon!"

Using a single hand to smoothly carry the motionless Long-Armed Demon on his shoulder, the man with eyes of a wolf turned to Guriko.

Since she owned an Apple, it would mean Long-Armed Demon wasn't dead. She seemed to have only acquired the Apple recently, so it was understandable for her to still feel pain. As Guriko thought of this, the man began another long soliloquy.

"Right. This girl's real name is Aizawa Ume. Her entire family was killed by a thief, and she herself had her two arms cut off. As she was about to go mad, her supernatural powers awakened and she killed the thief – I thought it'd be fun, so I used an Apple to solidify her disappearing powers and used her as a mercenary. Seems like I still need to tweak her a little."

Aizawa. The grave Long-Armed Demon was sleeping in front of had that surname. Then perhaps – no, it would definitely be the grave of her family. She also understood why only this grave was attended to in this moss-covered graveyard.

What she didn't understand was this man.

Looking at Guriko, who was giving off a battle pose rather than one of caution, he laughed out loud. It was an innocent laughter incongruous to his rough appearances.

"You don't remember me?"

She didn't remember. Though she tried to search her memories, she still couldn't remember.

"I don't remember you at all. Who are you?"

Since she couldn't remember him, then he should be someone of little importance to her. Guriko didn't lower her guard, and only asked disinterestedly: "How did you know my real name?"

"You're asking how?" The man seemed puzzled. Carrying Long-Armed Demon, he spoke to Guriko with a smile: "Well, consider me a mystery person for now. That Sterilization Disinfection is my natural enemy. I plan to keep my head low until that enemy goes away."

Sterilization Disinfection – what was that?

Turning his head, the man smiled over his shoulder to Guriko, who was frowning.

It was an evil smile, an unsettling evil smile.

"You really don't remember? My name is Zekiguchi Nashinori. Yono, it was I who killed you a thousand years ago."

What did that mean?

I almost died a thousand years ago because I fell into a pool at the bottom of a waterfall – no, I did die. I only got resurrected thanks to the Apple.

But how come I fell into that pool…? It was a road I passed everyday. There was no way that I would miss my footing.

"You, you…"

A chill sprang up her spine. The man who killed Yono, the girl who was living normally – the man who sent her into this immortal hell –

"But Yono, I think you're very dangerous. You're too ugly. You're obviously a monster, but you're living as a human. Such a stain will be hated by Sterilization Disinfection."

The wolf in a priest's skin stared at Guriko with his heinous eyes.

"So you must decide your future before you meet Sterilization

Disinfection. Will you live on as a monster, or as a human? But remember, you will certainly face Sterilization Disinfection if you choose to live as human. That is the Digestive Organ that can even dissolve God. You can't win in your current state. Moreover, not just you, even those close to you will also be met with misfortune."

Zekiguchi left after he said what he wanted to say.

Guriko kept standing in one spot, listening to his words without a single rebuttal. That was the choice which always stood before Guriko. Would she live on as a human, or as a monster?

Would she keep on living without Rinne?

Or would she place Rinne in danger?

"Waaaahhhhh!"

With a feeling of emptiness suddenly invading her heart, Guriko put her hands to her head and screamed.

Night 3: Boudoir

She was tired and she didn't know why. Would it be better off if she was angry? Or sad? She didn't know the answer to that. Her mind was muddled, her was head dizzy, and she wanted to throw up.

Guriko slumped down onto the sofa when she returned home and stared aimlessly at the ceiling. She took out a spoon almost subconsciously, the metal glistening and refracting the lamp's light.

Hino and Kio would probably be upset if they knew she fought Long-Armed Demon today – no, they'd definitely be upset. She had

broken that most basic promise of ‘do not harm others’.

“But –”

What should I have done then?

She was conflicted. She felt there were two of her, both of which believed in justice.

The Guriko who wanted to protect Rinne, protect the people in the school, and protect those in the town.

And the Guriko who decided not to harm others, who etched that resolve deep into her heart.

Though those two sides cannot be reconciled, they were nonetheless both my true selves. I had considered whether I still needed to fight, but I thought fighting was the best course of action at the time. There was nothing else I could have done. Besides, I still feel I was the only one who could defeat Long-Armed Demon.

“So you must choose your future before you meet Sterilization Disinfection. Will you live on as a monster, or as a human?”

The words spoken by the fake priest with feral eyes continued to echo within her mind.

She realized that the monster ‘Gankyū Egoriko’ did indeed exist within her heart when she fought Long-Armed Demon today. She was truly happy when she fought Long-Armed Demon; she felt excellent when she dug out the other’s eyeballs. But Rinne… she was only standing behind Guriko, yet that was enough to ignite her desire to kill. Though it wasn’t the real Rinne, it looked exactly the same – and should therefore have been the same.

She just happened to realize –

That she was certainly not a human.

She was a monster who lived for a millennium in the darkness, knowing nothing else but digging out eyeballs. Even an inorganic thing can become a demon after a century, so this thousand-year-old ancient husk should have left humanity behind a long time ago.

Even her heart –

Had been that of a monster for a long time.

Guriko now understood that. Feeling depressed, she gazed lazily at the spoon, for its light was the only thing that remained eternally steadfast.

She had always gazed, beseechingly, at this light in her world full of despair, where nothing was ever important to her.

She could only feel alive when she dug out other people's eyeballs and took their lives. *A monster that gouges out eyeballs – that is who I am.*

She remembered that. She actually remembered that.

"Urgh."

To hell with this common sense and standard social morals training.

What a bore! That's a training designed for a human.

Who am I? I am the Eyeball Gouger, a cruel monster who shouldn't be living other humans. No, I am a creature more akin to that Long-Armed Demon.

Guriko gritted her teeth so hard that they creaked, and she rose up from the luxurious sofa. Standing in the large uptown apartment situated in the middle of the Kannonsakazaki CBD, she sighed softly in the dark living room with view of the night stars through its ceiling-height glass walls.

Yono had always been the outsider. I was adopted, and I had no place in the family. A thousand years ago, I managed to keep living under the name of Gankyū Eguriko, and happened to accidentally find my place in the world thanks to Rinne and Sakaki. Then I just depended on them –

Countless eyeballs were crawling in the world within Guriko's mind.

Those were the eyeballs that she gouged out from other people in the past. Those empty eyeballs that lost their light eons ago stared straight at her emotionlessly.

The eyeballs of those she killed before their Apples took root; the eyeballs of those who attacked her in their pursuit for the secret of immortality; the eyeballs of those who only accidentally became her enemy… those were the eyeballs of innumerable humans… and countless Mushi.

– I…

That's right.

– I never deserved to obtain happiness.

I have no such rights. A monster should live like a monster, living in darkness till death. But I left the darkness, and I allowed myself to be surrounded by others' miraculous gentleness. So, I feel that I am dirty, shameful, detestable. I'd rather die.

It was the first time she felt like this.

Ahhh, Rinne isn't here. She's not here to smile gently at me while scolding me for these foolish thoughts.

The man with wolf-like eyes had suddenly appeared after she finished fighting and took Long-Armed Demon back. He had left Guriko with her face full of confusion as the only one standing at the battlefield.

Zekiguchi Nashinori – the man who claimed to have killed her a thousand years ago. Though she did not know his true identity, every one of his words left its mark on Guriko's soul.

I lost my cool when I saw Rinne. I was lucky. Though I figured out a solution this time, I wouldn't be so lucky had my opponent been stronger. I became weaker, much weaker than before. Since my physical abilities didn't change, it wasn't due to me having fewer Apples.

However, I still became weaker.

She gave Nageki's unconscious body to a passerby and asked the man to call for an ambulance, then she returned straight home because of a sudden bout of annoyance. Now she was home alone. Her 'parents', Hino and Kio, had yet to return to this apartment especially prepared for the 'common sense and standard social morals training'.

She had lived with the unnaturally excitable duo for three weeks already.

It'd be a lie to say she wasn't happy. In fact, Guriko smiled much more often now.

But this is a fake life, a fake happiness. My true parents gave up their

duties of nurturing me as a baby and discarded their child. My step parents didn't love me even once before the Mushi killed them. That was all. Now, after so many years, I no longer wish to have parents.

In the lightless room littered with potted plants, Guriko gazed unblinkingly at the dark and dead TV screen. She felt terrible. She had felt nothing except an uncomfortable guilt and emptiness since her fight with Long-Armed Demon.

"Click", the light was turned on.

Hino and Kio stood unmoving in the living room like wraiths, their faces devoid of any emotion. Startled and puzzled, Guriko still greeted them in her confusion: "Wel… welcome back. What's wrong? Why so quiet today?"

"…"

Hino started to move soundlessly. Odd, what was with her doll-like face? Her face, which always blossomed with smiles, was currently looking blankly at Guriko as the older woman slowly raised her head.

Then, as if someone suddenly switched her on: "Wow, Guriko-chan! There you are!"

At the same time, Kio also burst out: "Ahaha, I didn't notice you at all! Are you hungry, Guriko? I'm cooking dinner today. What do you want to eat? I'll make it for you!"

They spoke with unnatural light-heartedness.

That was odd. Though they had always acted in a funny manner, something about them just now gave her a worrying impression.

Guriko sighed. She didn't want to talk to them anyways now.

"Be quiet."

She closed her eyes, crossed her arms, and leaned back into the sofa: "I won't be eating dinner tonight. I don't feel like it. Sorry, please just have it between yourselves."

"Oh my!"

As a result, Hino jumped rather exaggeratedly.

“Are you alright, Guriko-chan? You’re not eating! You’re not eating! Ohh, I’m so surprised that I said it twice! W-w-what’s wrong, are you sick? Are you not feeling well? Aaaah, Guriko-chan! Guriko-chan is going to die?!”

Shut up.

Guriko shut her eyes more forcibly, and replied coldly with a displeased expression: “Be quiet. I can have mood swings too.”

She couldn’t talk like this. Her mood wasn’t stable enough.

“So leave me alone.”

“No! If anything happens to Guriko-chan, then Mom will die!”

Mom?

“Dad won’t be able to work either! Guriko, are you really really alright? Do you need to see a doctor? Or do you –”

Dad?

What’s that? How can a monster like me have parents?!

She suddenly felt a nameless rage building up inside her, felt an irritation that had no cause. She was probably letting her anger out on them. The duo were genuinely worried about her, but she somehow found their attitudes annoying. With a sharp and sour tone, Guriko rebuked coldly: “Shut up! Stop yelling so loudly!”

“Guriko-chan…”

Honestly. Please, stop being so nice to such a crass kid. Hino showed a worried expression as if she were truly troubled. She approached the cold monster and placed her hand on Guriko’s forehead, saying: “No fever, at least.”

– An action that could really make Guriko believe the illusion that Hino was truly her ‘mother’.

Stop it!

That’s enough, stop!

I don’t have that right. I’ve killed many people, I’ve eliminated many many people. They were someone’s parents, someone’s children.

A month ago, some people gently accepted this monster – me. They were Usagawa Rinne and Sakaki Guryū. But I–I–I am obviously a monster, a monster who doesn't deserve happiness.

Compared to the Guriko living such an ordinary life, the Guriko who fought fellow monsters in a bloodbath like today's is much closer to my true self. I am a demon, just like the Long-Armed Demon who had killed ten people.

"Don't touch me!"

Guriko screamed and flung away Hino's hand with an incomprehensible rage. Shocked, Hino's face paled and she slowly stepped away. The room was immediately immersed in silence.

"Guriko?"

Hearing Kio's voice, Guriko put her hands to her face and moaned. She couldn't take this anymore.

"Stop it. That's enough, stop it! It hurts to pretend to be a family. It hurts!"

The monster that gouged eyeballs denied all that she now possessed.

I don't want to think any more. I'm tired. I'm dizzy. I want to throw up. I want to die.

Noah's Ark is a rather famous myth that came from the Bible. Put up your hand if you know about it. Oh, that's a surprisingly large amount of people. It's probably not because the Japanese all started to believe in Christianity, but because we knew of it from games or manga. Right. Look closely, girls, the boys with their hands up right now are the fabled otaku who're into games and anime. Hey, you over there, don't put your hand down! There's nothing wrong with being an otaku! I like those things too!

The Age of Gods was an age when even the plants spoke and the existence magic was commonplace. During that time, humans – the descendants of Adam and Eve – fell into unsalvageable corruption. They stopped trusting others, indulged in wanton pleasure, and were content with just satisfying the desires of the flesh – and they even slaughtered each other. They had silently – but undoubtedly –

fallen.

Beholding such a scene, God was enraged, and called upon a great flood to eliminate all of humanity. That is the myth of Noah's Flood. Oh? What's wrong, milady? You look like you want to say something. I see. Do you desire so much for me to publically declare my love? Alright, I'll take a deep breath in and say it out loud. Milady Usarin, I – love – you!

"Kya~, sensei, please don't do this! Why is sensei so excited today? What happened in the story afterwards?"

No need to be embarrassed.

"Sensei – I would hate you if you do that! Um, sensei, I have a question. If all humans died in that flood, then we wouldn't have been born."

Ahaha, milady is being too polite. Looks like you've put some distance between us. Now I feel lonely. Anyways, God wasn't that cruel. However, judging from how He decided to mass slaughter humans, we can definitely question whether He has any sense of ethics or morality. But you are right, it wasn't simply a slaughter. Hmm… it's like a reload in one of those games you otakus are so fond of. Hey, otaku there, don't space out. Now, God created a mighty boat, the 'Ark', which was powerful enough to withstand the flood. He made the kindest man on earth – Noah – go on board with his family.

All other animals were supposed to be killed together with humans as well. Perhaps God felt that to be too cruel, so He saved one pair of each animal and sent them on the boat. Therefore, the Ark that carried the husbands and wives that would create a new world set off, and all that was left behind perished in the flood.

In a world that had all its civilizations utterly annihilated, the residents of the Ark began their lives anew after the flood receded – that is the myth of Noah's Flood. This was probably meant to teach us 'if we do evil, then God will slaughter us with a flood'. However, if a flood powerful enough to destroy all the races in the world was actually unleashed, then Earth itself would have been eliminated. Without plants, the producers, it would become a dead and ashen world. There would have been no food left on the Ark, so carnivorous animals would have begun to devour herbivores. The Ark would then have devolved into a hellish scene of slaughter,

bathed in blood –

“Um, sensei?”

Oh? What’s wrong, milady?”

“Sensei, does this have anything to do with our class? Right now is Math class…”

There there. All knowledge has something to do with classwork. Yes, it all has something to do with the class of ‘life’. What? What are you guys laughing at? I just said something brilliant!

Having finished all her classes, Usagawa Rinne walked alone on her way home. The strong wind blew her hair in all directions and the gravel of the country road, sharp like bullets, hammered against her exposed flesh.

But Rinne paid no attention to the wind or the gravel. Looking troubled, she only mumbled to herself.

“Should I call? – can I call? – ”

Guriko didn’t come to school today.

She didn’t see Guriko this morning. She didn’t think that person would skip school. However, the girl with the wolf-like haircut didn’t show up even as the final bell rang. Though she acted like a derelict, Guriko never skipped school. A strong sense of unrest had been stirring within Rinne ever since the weird detective spoke to them in that café last night.

With a single ‘wait here’, Gankyū Egoriko had disappeared.

Rinne waited till midnight for Guriko, but she never returned.

It’s alright. Guriko is strong.

I believe she’ll definitely come back.

But she didn’t come to school today.

She thought that the worst shouldn’t have happened. She felt that – Guriko wouldn’t have –

Even so, Rinne couldn't help but think of Katsumi. They had promised a meeting only for Katsumi to be murdered by Long-Armed Demon. Did Guriko… get killed by Long-Armed Demon too, just like Katsumi?

Rinne was extremely anxious, so anxious that she would have gone mad. She wanted to discuss it with Sakaki, but he seemed to be unnaturally busy because of his work at school.

She shouldn't bother him.

But she was so worried about Guriko.

She could't depend on Sakaki forever. She must find some way herself. She couldn't always take advantage of Sakaki and allow him to pamper her. She couldn't always be content with letting others protect her.

"I'll make the call."

Having made up her mind, Rinne walked into a street lined with shops. Taking cover from the wind, Rinne ducked into an alleyway between two shops and took out her cellphone after quietly sitting down.

Rinne was very poor. She shouldn't be able to afford something like this. In fact, Sakaki bought it for her, and he also covered the phone bills. Embarrassed, Rinne refrained from using it frequently. But now it was different. It wasn't the time to dally.

Though she didn't know where Guriko now lived, she did give Rinne her new phone number. Rinne would now have to make a gamble, and pray for Guriko to pick up the phone. Rinne had taught Guriko how to use a phone and how to answer it the last time they were together. Guriko would at least pick it up, right?

Dialling the number that she had saved into her phone, Rinne puffed out gasps of white steam while she waited for the phone to be answered. The air was freezing cold deep in the dark alley. With the frozen blade of the wind cutting into her skin, the sound of the gale roaring through the alley seemed even noisier.

Rinne now regretted making the call before she got home.

But that couldn't be helped now. She kept waiting and prayed for Guriko to answer.

It went on like this for a long time.

Perhaps no one was home. Just as Rinne was about to give up: " – hello, this is the Itsuwara household."

An unfamiliar female voiced answered.

Itsuwara. They should be Guriko's foster parents who were living with her. She would probably know if Guriko was home or not.

It was a phone call, but Rinne still composed her posture and bowed formally.

"Ah, hi… hello. I'm, um, I'm Guriko's classmate. My name is Usagawa Rinne. Is Guriko home?"

In just the blink of an eye –

The female voice, which was previously mixed with apprehension, suddenly became excited.

"Woah! Friend? Guriko's friend? Kio, Guriko's friend showed up. Ah, he's not home. His loss. Yes yes! Hello! I'm Guriko's mom. I'm Itsuwara Hino!"

"Er…"

With the other talking with such an unstoppable vigor, Rinne didn't know how to respond. Stunned, she sat there for a few seconds, her face blank with shock.

Picking herself up again, she spoke to Hino, who was screaming excitedly on the other end of the phone: "Hello again, um – Guriko today – ?"

"Guriko? Guriko!"

Hino's voice, saturated with happiness, became even louder with barely a pause.

"Guriko is very cute, isn't she? She was feeling a little down yesterday for some reason. My yelling made her angry, and we almost had a fight. But she sneaked into my room late last night and gave me a birthday present! It was a kaleidoscope! Isn't it cute? She didn't apologize to my face, but she put it on my table. This is such an ingenious idea! She's so great at making me happy! I would forgive anything she ever did. I love her! GurikoLove! Shortened to

GuriLove!”

She went on and on like a rapid-fire cannon, and Rinne ended up being even more confused. Anyways, it seemed whatever Guriko bought yesterday was the gift she gave to Hino. Now that she mentioned it, Guriko did say something about her parent’s birthday.

Guriko bought her present yesterday. Since she gave it to her mother late at night, then it meant she returned home safely.

This, at least, made Rinne breathe a sigh of relief. Keep inquiring after Guriko, she asked Hino: “Then… this means Guriko is safe and sound?”

“Safe and sound? What do you mean safe and sound?”

Hino answered incredulously.

“Usagawa-san, my Guriko is as cute as ever today! The only one with a problem is me, who can’t think straight because of how cute Guriko is!”

That sounded… really impressive.

“Oh? Should I pass the phone to her? Guriko said she doesn’t want to go to school today and stayed in her room without even coming out to eat. But hey, everyone has those moments, right? I used to pretend to be sick and skip school when I was a student, too. The school actually thought I was a weak girl because I did it so often, and the boys even visited me to see how I was doing. Usagawa-san, a physically weak girl will have guys wanting to protect her. That’s a very popular type! You should make it your goal! Tell you what, one of the boys who visited me is now my husband! Ahahahaha!”

“…”

What a high-spirited person. Rinne sighed, and then casually urged Hino with her polite tone.

“I see. Then, can I please speak to Guriko?”

“Sure! Leave it to me! Um…”

Half way through her sentence, Hino fell silent as if suddenly deep in thought.

“Um, I didn’t catch it completely. What’s your name again?”

“Usagawa Rinne.”

“Usagawa…”

A pause, as if thinking, but more like she was straining to recall something.

“Rinne. Ah! Ahhhhh! Usawaga Rinne! Right! I was about to say that your name sounds familiar! You are the girl who was in Guryū-san’s arms, right? Now I remember; you were in the file. Hmm? Since you’re Guryū-san’s lover, doesn’t that make you the future matriarch of the Organization? Oh my, I was so rude. I’ll pass the phone immediately. Duuuuuuu –”

With an odd onomatopoeia, Hino’s voice drifted further and further away.

It was a wireless phone, and the Hold button wasn’t pressed. Rinne could hear the sounds of Hino walking towards Guriko’s room. Hino was loud, and she could even hear a mysterious tune sounding like “Lalalala – lalalala – Guriko-chan Guriko-chan it’s for you!”

Soon, Hino seemed to arrived at Guriko’s room. Rinne could hear vague conversations and the sound of knocking for a while. Guriko seemed to have genuinely locked herself in her room. But at least she was safe. That was good enough. Rinne was relieved.

She was her savior. She was her important friend.

Guriko.

It was so wonderful that she was alright.

Still wearing her school uniform, Rinne released a long sigh of relief in the alleyway. She still hadn’t lost her peripheral sensations, and sitting on the ground for so long made her feel the chill all the way to her bones.

After a while, she heard the sound of a door opening, and Hino’s incomprehensible yelling.

“… Rinne.”

She finally heard Guriko’s low and deep voice, a voice that she was already missing after one day.

Rinne smiled and replied with a bright and happy tone: “Ah,

Guriko-chan. This is great. You're safe!"

"Yes, I am safe. What's up? Ah, ah – " As if she suddenly recalled something, Guriko stuttered: "S-sorry. I left you in the café last night… were you worried about me?"

"Of course I am!"

It was a tone full of mock anger. Rinne, however, felt more settled than ever.

"But it's great that you're alright, Guriko-chan. What happened yesterday? Why didn't you come to school today?"

"…"

Guriko was silent.

Then, as if beseeching for help, she said with a lonely voice. "Hey, Rinne."

It was a weak sound, one that she rarely used. "I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

Rinne's expression also became serious as she listened to Guriko.

"What happened, Guriko-chan?"

"I fought Long-Armed Demon yesterday."

Emotionlessly, Guriko recited what had happened.

"Although I won, I also realized my own cruelty. I'm a monster. Of course I'm a monster, a monster that gouged eyeballs. Rinne, I realized something. I'm not human. I shouldn't be going to school. I shouldn't stay with humans."

It was a pained sound as if she was forcibly squeezing those words out of her mouth.

"I… I don't know when I'll end up like Long-Armed Demon."

"Guriko-chan?"

Guriko's voice was distant and wavering as if she was about to disappear. Rinne couldn't help but reach out her hand. However,

there was nothing in front of her. There was only the cold wind blowing along.

So far away.

Guriko was so far away.

“So… Rinne,” Guriko mumbled in a low voice: “Perhaps I won’t see you again. Perhaps it’s best if we never meet again.”

She hung up the phone. The sound of a disconnected line came beeping through.

Rinne screamed in surprise: “W-wait! Guriko-chan! Guriko-chan?”

What was that about?

Rinne called out. However, any words would be meaningless for an already disconnected phone call. Rinne’s face paled, and she sank into silence while tightly holding onto the phone.

Guriko called herself a monster.

Just what happened last night? Rinne felt scared, and hugged the phone to her chest. Terrifying. Guriko said she won’t see her again.

I don’t want that.

And Guriko isn’t a monster. I like her, and so does Sakaki. And Hino – she also appeared to care for Guriko a lot.

‘If she was so cherished by everyone else, how can she be a monster?

Guriko… Guriko!

“Hello.”

Suddenly.

“Hello, miss.”

Rinne heard a sound coming from next to her.

“… you’ll catch a cold if you sit here.”

An incredulous person stood there.

She had a mask that completely covered her mouth, but she wore a revealing and feminine outfit incongruous in the winter.

Her hair was in a long braid, and bangles and chains chimed on her arms.

This incredulous woman sniggered, then said with a voice as sweet as honey: “You were screaming just then, weren’t you? You couldn’t reach someone’s heart with your words, right? That person is very important to you, isn’t it? Are you sad…? Or lonely…? But it’s best if you can treasure this emotion. If you start to feel happiness even from experiencing misfortunes, then you’d truly become a monster. That’s what I think.”

Hearing her vague but incredibly touching words, Rinne stood up with surprise written all over her face and turned towards her suspiciously.

Rinne didn’t take well to those with odd appearances.

Though she felt a little scared, she still spoke: “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Oh! Ahaha, right – we haven’t met before. Little wonder that you’re so alarmed.”

The mysterious woman put her hand to her cheek gracefully, and smiled charmingly.

“My name is Saibara Mina. It’s only a small matter that I need your help with. Can I borrow your phone? The spread of cellphones made phone booths disappear one after another, which is inconvenient for people like me who don’t have cellphones. Though I don’t dislike the idea of completely eliminating such useless items – why, I even prefer this idea – but simply destroying these items without reason is not a commendable method either.”

It was as if she deliberately used difficult words. Rinne didn’t understand all of that.

Anyways, it seemed she just wanted to borrow her phone.

Rinne would usually have refused her out of caution. However, though the other was now smiling, Rinne got the feeling her anger would be terrifying indeed. Rinne nodded, and decided to listen to her for now.

She silently handed the phone over – and Mina smiled alluringly.

“Mmm, thanks.”

Then she started dialing out a number without further ado and waited for it to connect.

Rinne felt awkward. Crossing her fingers, she looked at Mina. The other woman was dressed extremely scantily; didn’t she feel cold?

She should be able to feel temperature, right?

“Hey, Meat Doll?”

Rinne’s thoughts instantly froze with Mina’s utterly incomprehensible sentence.

What did she say? Meat Doll?

Rinne stared at Mina. She couldn’t tell whether the other woman noticed this or not with Mina still speaking softly into the phone.

She didn’t tell the person on the other end of the phone her name, either.

“Right – it’s time to get to work. I helped you to find someone. What? I’m at the shopping district now. Me? Hey, I told you my specialty is elimination, not murder. Got it? Besides, if that person happens to run away, it’s best to hide my true identity. Why don’t you think this through with that thick brain of yours? If you end up acting like an idiot, then I won’t hold up my end of the bargain either.”

Mina finished speaking, disconnected, and returned the phone to Rinne with a smile.

What was that about? Rinne felt an uneasy aura.

Scared of digging deeper into this, Rinne hurriedly packed away her phone and nodded softly to Mina: “Er… I’ll get going then.”

“Ahh, I see.” As if pleased, Mina smiled. “Thank you. Take care then!”

She left these words, and gently waved her goodbye.

Rinne's home was beyond the shopping streets close to the school, and at the end of a bumpy country path.

This apartment building stood alone in a deserted area, surrounded by empty land. Thanks to its incredibly atrocious conditions, the rent was also astonishingly cheap.

Even if she saw other residents, they would not usually communicate with each other. The only one that she had developed any real rapport with was the musician onee-san living next door.

Directly in front of Rinne's door was an old washing machine that the previous owner didn't take away.

The neighbor that stood in front of the washing machine tilted her head to one side as she looked up at Rinne. That tilting movement was her habit. Even Rinne, who had gotten used to it, still found it hard to discern whether it meant agreement or disagreement, apologies or gratitude.

"Welcome back, Ring-bell."

Her voice was low with an odd pronunciation.

Her bleached hair waved in the wind as she stood still in her cheap and dirt-stained dress. She seemed to be of foreign descent, and her irises had a cloudy violet sheen.

"Break-nee, are you doing the laundry?"

"Ring-bell, I've been considering it for a while, but Break-nee is just too strange. This washing machine is yours. Sorry for using it without asking your permission."

Break-nee apologized emotionlessly. She was very shy, introverted, and quiet. Since she rarely changed her expression, it was hard to read her true thoughts.

But Rinne felt she wasn't a bad person.

Rinne made a small wave with her hand, and lowered her gaze.

"Ahh, no, this washing machine isn't mine. It belonged to the person who lived here beforehand."

"Really? That's good."

Break-nee tilted her head, and pressed button after button with experienced ease according to the washing machine's complicated operating system. Then, she abruptly turned and left for her room.

Before she left, she opened her door a crack, and looked over with a tilt of her head, her face full of confusion: "Ring-bell, what happened to that girl Guriko?"

"Huh?"

Didn't I tell her?

Though she felt a bit sad, she replied: "Ah – um, Guriko didn't have any family, but there are now people who are willing to be her foster parents. She's now living with them…"

"I see."

She tilted her head, and frowned as if deep in thought.

"This may be dangerous. I am very weak, and I can't protect you."

Break-nee said something incomprehensible.

"Take care, Ring-bell. The world is full of dangers, even today."

Rinne still didn't understand. Break, however, had already returned to her room.

"…"

What a mysterious person.

Rinne gazed at the turning washing machine as she thought this. With a sigh, she inserted her key and entered her home.

This tiny room, with the kitchen and the bathroom squeezed in, was packed full with things.

Though Rinne tidied the room almost every day, she couldn't help with the fact that the room was simply too small.

Rinne turned on the air conditioning to chase away the stuffy air, took off her jacket, and changed from uniform to casual clothes.

She felt so tired.

She found it hard to sleep ever since Katsumi died. She always felt anxious, and even accidentally fell down a slope. She had sunk into a swamp of melancholy.

It couldn't go on like this.

It was her bad habit to be so pessimistic.

Maybe she would cook to feel better.

What was left in the fridge? As she thought this, Rinne walked to her sink next to the wall to wash her face, then moved to the fridge.

Her fridge was only a quarter as big as a normal one.

Rinne wanted to have some barley tea first, so she took a cup and soothed her throat, which was dry in the cold winter air.

"Haaaa –"

It was very, very tiring.

She shook her head. She ran out of fish and meat; it seemed today's dinner will be a simple one. Then, feeling that it was too early to cook dinner, she glanced at her watch.

She didn't have work today, and could afford to rest well.

Though she might get yelled at, she wanted to call Guriko again. It would be too sad to just part ways like that.

Just what was wrong with Guriko?

What happened between her and Long-Armed demon?

She couldn't reach her answer no matter what, and she paced in her room as her thoughts roiled.

" – creak."

It was a very minute sound.

Rinne thought she was hallucinating, and looked at her phone.

" – Creak, crack."

Looking up, she glanced all around her. Somehow, an ominous

feeling crept up within her. Her face paled, her body stiffened, Rinne called out in a low voice: “Who is it?”

“ – Creak.”

She realized it was the window.

The window next to the sink, which she always found hard to close.

The window – with a crisp sound – creaked apart on its own.

A crack formed on the glass. The window split into two. Then, the glass surface shattered into fragments and showered down.

“Ahh –”

The paranormal scene made Rinne stumble backward in fear. Turning toward the door, she tried to flee as quickly as possible.

“Found –”

But she heard the low voice of a girl.

“ – You.”

The entire window had disappeared.

The frosted glass, which previously only gave a vague outline of the outside, was completely destroyed. In the space previous occupied by the glass, a girl poked out her head and smiled innocently.

It was a terrifying and inhuman appearance.

One of the girl’s eyes was covered by an eye-patch, while the other was bloodshot red. Despite such a pitiful appearance, she continued smiling innocently: “Haha, haha –”

It was very scary.

“Aaaaaaahhhhhh!”

Screaming, Rinne sprinted towards the door. It wasn’t far from her.

She remembered what happened a month ago.

Demons, ghosts, and monsters were not opponents that Rinne could hope to deal with on her own.

She could only run. Without Guriko or Sakaki beside her, she could only run.

Her shoulder was suddenly clutched by something.

No way – Rinne turned around.

“I won’t let you escape again!”

No one was behind her.

But Rinne’s body was controlled by an incredibly strong force, and she was thrown out of the broken window. She screamed as her sight span. Flying through the window, she landed hard on the tarmac road near the rubbish dump outside of her house.

“Uuuuuhh – ”

She couldn’t breathe.

It was very painful. Rinne had barely lost any of her sense of pain.

Her sight became dizzy due to the impact.

Meanwhile, in her whirling sight –

“How was it? Long-Armed Demon’s two arms are very very long, right?”

– stood Long-Armed Demon.

The name echoed in her ears.

Could it really be –?

“Zeki-kun already told me your name and what you look like. Usagawa Rinne – I won’t make any mistakes again. I won’t let you escape again. I, Long-Armed Demon, must have your Apple.”

An unnaturally cruel and dark will emitted out of that bloodshot eye.

“I won’t get it wrong again, I won’t fail again! Long-Armed Demon will push you into the deepest abyss of hell and take away your Apple. Otherwise, Zeki-kun will abandon me!”

Rinne was terrified of this screaming girl from the bottom of her

heart. She tried her best to force her limp legs to stand, and to run.

She mustn't turn around. She must escape – she must escape.

Otherwise, she'll be killed.

She'll definitely be killed.

She is my opponent, someone who wants to have my Apple and targeted me because of my Apple.

Like Mushi and Snake, she would probably use all she can to take away my Apple.

No.

I can't die here.

I want to keep living with Sakaki and Guriko.

I've already decided that a month ago on the day Guriko returned to us.

"You think you can run away?"

Long-Armed Demon muttered this as 'something' erupted out of her body. Fortunately, the unpredictable attack didn't hit Rinne. Instead, it blew up the tarmac road, and fragments of bitumen scattered everywhere.

If she was hit by such a thing, there was no way she could come out in one piece.

Long-Armed Demon.

Was Katsumi killed by this horrifying force that defiled logic?

Remembering her dead friend, Rinne bit hard on her lips to hold back her anger. With a heavy push against the ground, she started to run again.

She was scared. She was anxious. She didn't have the battle prowess to avenge Katsumi. The least she could do was to avoid being killed in the same manner.

Having probably heard the ruckus, the door opposite Rinne's apartment opened and Break poked out her head incredulously.

“What’s this big noise I heard?”

Rinne was running on the uneven road in front of the apartment block. Raising her head, she glared at Break.

“Break! Go hide! And call the police – no, contact sensei first! He’d call the police!”

“Ring-bell, what’s going on? Police?”

Besides Break-nee, who was looking utterly puzzled, the girl with no arms and an eye-patch quickly caught up.

Though Break-nee was frightened, she still realized Rinne was in some sort of danger, and asked: “What’s wrong?”

“Hmm? You’re gonna stop me?” The demonic girl turned her head.

Damn!

Rinne raised the cellphone she still clenched in her hand, and threw it towards Long-Armed Demon’s face. It hit her. Though Rinne wasn’t good with sports, she managed to hit her –

“Break-nee! Hide!”

“Meow!” As if the phone was sucked towards her, it landed squarely on Long-Armed Demon’s forehead. With a strange sound, she looked towards Rinne: “What? You want to fight me? It doesn’t hurt! So it doesn’t matter!”

But it looked painful.

Long-Armed Demon’s gaze shifted away from Break-nee, instead staring angrily at Rinne and began to run towards her. That was good.

Having perhaps registered Rinne’s serious expression, Break-nee closed her door and retreated back into her room. Done. Now all Rinne needed to do was the escape.

Rinne ran on the uneven dirt road, and the gravel and the bumps in the road made it particularly difficult.

Where should she run to? Her enemy seemed beyond reason. If she ran towards a place with many other people, she may well be endangering other lives.

She couldn't do that.

Then, where to?

"I said you can't run anymore!"

She suddenly felt she was floating.

Rinne's feet became entangled in something, and she fell forward uncontrollably. How – ?

Turning her head, she saw that she was still very far from Long-Armed Demon. There was no way for her to have touched Rinne.

Did she throw something? It didn't look like it.

Then – what was this –

Neither Snake nor the Mushi she faced a month ago possess any special abilities. They were not too different from humans.

But she was different. Long-Armed Demon was different.

She was genuinely supernatural.

"How was it? Long-Armed Demon's arms are very, very long, right? A puny human like you cannot escape –"

"Snap."

"Crunch."

It was an odd sound.

At the same time, an unimaginable pain assaulted Rinne's legs.

"Urgh!"

They were broken.

"Ugggghhh, uuuuuuuuuhh!"

Rinne held back her tears and screams, and moaned as she knelt on the ground.

Both of her legs were broken –

The incredible pain that roared in her brain made her mind even

clearer. No, she couldn't escape. Both of her legs were broken. She could not escape.

Yet, she couldn't…

Give up.

No, that was not an option.

I can't die. That is a promise. I'll be with Sakaki forever, living together, being happy together.

But she couldn't move. With tears in her eyes, Rinne turned her head.

"Why, why are you doing this?"

"Reason? Why are you asking a demon for reasons?" Long-Armed Demon roared, and yelled out incomprehensible things with unstrained rage: "Long-Armed Demon doesn't know the reasons either! I was almost killed for no reason! My two arms were cut off, and Zeki-kun saved me just as I was about to die! I finally understood then – we don't need reasons! That man killed my family and took my arms for no reason, too! He didn't even tell me his reason when I twisted his arms off him and drilled a hole into his stomach! There was no reason. He just felt happy doing it!"

With a heinous expression, Long-Armed demon screamed at Rinne, who lay motionless on the ground.

Rinne felt a sense of pressure, as if her shoulder was held tight by invisible fingers.

Invisible arms – was this Long-Armed Demon's power? Though Rinne understood it, she was powerless against it. The pain was making her thoughts disjointed.

She felt Long-Armed Demon was just a poor kid.

A little child who had lost her way, and was crying alone.

"There are many such demons in this world! I finally decided what to do after I understood it. I don't want to be a human that others want to kill. I want to be the one who kills – to become a happy demon! Then it won't hurt! Then nothing would be taken away from me!"

Her clavicle was instantly snapped with ease.

“I’m Long-Armed Demon. I’m not a creature like a human. So I won’t cry! And I won’t feel pain –”

Both her legs, and her left shoulder –

Were completely devastated. For a moment, Rinne blacked out.

Her snapped bones pierced her skin, peeking out of her flesh. Her clothes were soon dyed crimson with the blood that seeped out.

The beating of her heart mirrored the pulse of her agony, passing spurts of pain throughout her.

Even so…

I still don’t want to die.

And, also –

For some reason, I feel –

… She is just a poor girl.

I don’t know anything about her. I don’t know who she really is, or how she grew up.

But I can still tell a few things from her words.

It was as if she was very similar to how Guriko was when Rinne first met her. Though she was strong, she was actually very fragile.

No, she was in danger because of her strength. She would exert her monstrous strength to continue walking along the thorny path that she accidentally set foot upon, until she reached the point of no return.

That would be such a pity.

Rinne wiped the tears she shed due to the pain, and looked at Long-Armed Demon.

“That’s unforgivable. Who made you like this? The pain of having something taken from you, and the pain of taking from others – you should understand that sorrow better than anyone else, right?”

“Huh?”

Long-Armed Demon was startled.

“Huh? Huh? Human… why would a human creature look at Long-Armed Demon with such eyes?”

Her face swathed in confusion, Long-Armed Demon bit on her lower lip hard.

“Don’t look at Long… Long-Armed Demon with those eyes. Long-Armed Demon didn’t do anything wrong! Don’t look at me with such kind eyes!”

Long-Armed Demon was screaming. Her face, however, was becoming more and more fuzzy in Rinne’s eyes.

This hurts. No, she was far too weak.

She couldn’t help anyone. She kept relying on everyone. Then… she would probably be killed here, having accomplished nothing.

Ahhh.

I don’t want to die. Rinne wiped away her tears with her palm. The blood that sprouted out of her shoulder dripped to her fingertips. Traces of sticky blood clang tightly to the skin of her cheek.

Ahhh –

“Bam.”

There was a sound.

“Bam – bam – ”

What was that?

Long-Armed Demon looked in surprise. Lowering her torso, she readied herself for battle.

“What?”

Still kneeling on the ground, it took Rinne a lot of effort to turn her head to look behind her.

There.

Like a lump of meat, and also like a doll.

“Bam – Bam –”

It was a strange existence made of intertwining lumps of black and red meat, something that ordinary humans wouldn’t be able to bring themselves to gaze upon. It glistened with a moist sheen in the gradually darkening light of the dusk, and emitted a revolting scent like that of blood and rotting meat.

There were long, thick strips of meat, twisted and banded together to make a human shape. It was like a doll whose body was made of innumerable ropes of meat. There were bulges on the ropes of meat that were tied together, bulges which then converged into limbs and finally completed the figure.

There were no ears, nose, or mouth on that face. Only a single, giant eyeball existed there. And from that face –

“Nnnnnnnnnnuuuuuuuuu.”

– poured out a low sound that crawled towards Rinne.

As if also scared of that sound, Long-Armed Demon maintained her pose, her eyes wide open.

The strange meat doll slowly reached Rinne, then stood unmoving beside her. Call it wishful thinking, but Rinne felt as if it was protecting her.

Long-Armed Demon probably also reached that conclusion. The ends of her lips tilted up, and she declared provocatively: “What? I don’t know what you want. But if you want to stop Long-Armed Demon, then I’ll kill you!”

The meat doll didn’t answer.

Maybe that ruined her mood.

“Hmm.” A heinous expression briefly surfaced on Long-Armed demon’s face as her invisible power exploded out: “Then die!”

It exploded. Unsurprisingly, the head of the meat doll exploded after having been penetrated by an invisible arm.

The red and black pieces of meat that fluttered down from the sky landed one by one on the uneven road in the middle of the

wasteland.

It was over. I'll be killed.

However, just as Rinne and Long-Armed Demon both understood the fact that the meat doll was now dead –

"What?"

The meat doll, which had remained docile so far, suddenly stretched out its right arm in lightning speed.

Long-Armed Demon had perhaps let down her guard, and was standing defenselessly. The arm pierced her thigh and emerged out of the other side.

Blood spluttered everywhere.

"Urgh!" Long-Armed Demon finally reacted. Her face twisted as she retaliated: "Ahhhhh, it hurts! I hate pain!!"

Her invisible power exploded again and again.

"Die! Die! Why don't you die!"

With every blow, more broken fragments of the meat doll flew out into the air. Its arm, feet, and abdomen were all reduced to dust, and showered down on the ground.

But it did not die, and it did not fall.

"What!?"

No, it was more than that. The scattered pieces of flesh crawled slowly on the ground, like ants swarming upon a piece of chocolate, and all returned to the core of the meat doll.

"Ahhh!"

Seeing this terrifying scene, Rinne couldn't help but scream out. What was that? How was this possible?

Long-Armed Demon didn't seem to understand, either. Despite knowing it to be useless, she kept using her power over and over.

The meat doll's torso was torn and blown up into a million pieces, and it would recover instantly.

Immortality.

That was an immortality that even Rinne could not achieve, the ultimate end.

Just what was this meat doll? Why –

“Yes, my question is…”

A voice.

A female voice that was sweet as honey and mixed with some familiarity sounded.

Right beside the continuous battle between Long-Armed Demon and the meat doll, without being noticed by anyone else, leaving no signs of her approach –

“Why are you protecting Usagawa Rinne, Meat Doll?”

Saibara Mina stood there.

Her hair was tied into a long braid, her mouth covered with a mask.

In her hand, there was a simple spray paint can.

“Who are you?”

Long-Armed Demon’s arms stopped attacking, and she glared at Mina with alarm.

Even Rinne felt the uncanny aura that she seemed to exude. It was an intimidation that she never felt in their first meeting. It was a sense of control that allowed no rebellion or violation, as if the mere acts of breathing or the beating of a heart required her permission.

Saibara Mina’s eyes smiled as she hugged herself.

“Oh, hahaha, wait a second, cute Long-Armed Demon. For now –” shifting her gaze to the Meat Doll, she spread her hands: “I have a question I must ask. Meat Doll, why did you disobey my command and refrain from killing Usagawa Rinne?”

“Nuuuu –”

Rinne understood then.

Neither Mina nor the Meat Doll were heroes that came to save her.

She understood. It was over.

Guriko was sleeping. Hino had made sure of it.

Her heart was at breaking point, having been burdened with so many thoughts. For such an emotionally unstable child, the best

thing to do was to coax her into sleep. Once asleep, the human brain would cure the broken and rotten parts of the mind on its own, and would heal the sick heart.

The only thing Guriko lacked was sleep.

That was what Itsuwara Hino believed.

Therefore, she put Guriko to sleep.

Hino regularly visited the hospital for her own conditions. The doctors had prescribed some effective sedatives for her.

Guriko seemed to have no resistance to modern medicines. With the mattress wrapped tightly around her, she fell asleep hugging the pillow.

“Sorry.”

That muttering voice did not come from Hino’s mouth.

But from the slender girl who shivered as she tightly hugged the pillow.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m still alive, I’m sorry…’

“You don’t need to apologize.”

Hino murmured. She gently caressed Guriko’s head. The messy wolf-like haircut was damp with the cold sweat, feeling slightly hot under Hino’s hand.

Gently, Hino bent down and whispered to Guriko: “It – wasn’t your fault.”

“Sorry.”

Of course, Guriko couldn’t hear what she said. She only kept on apologizing with an anguished expression on her face.

Hino sighed and looked at the clock hanging on the wall, which had hands all made up of spoons.

She bought this because Guriko looked at it with such a rare look of longing.

Why did she love spoons so? Hino knew that Guriko would

sometimes space out while staring at a spoon.

Was she a spoon fanatic? Everyone has different hobbies. Hino wouldn't force her to change, but she somehow felt this to be an unhealthy obsession.

"Kio is so slow. He should be home by now."

Confused, she muttered to herself while thinking of all the possibilities.

"Did he have to stay behind for work?"

That sounded right. It felt so lonely. Hino would feel anxious whenever he left her side.

She wouldn't know what to do.

Tears soon welled out of Guriko's eyes as she mumbled while sobbing in her sleep.

"Kill me… kill me, kill me, kill me."

It was a sad and anguished sound, a weak voice unimaginable for Guriko to utter during her waking hours.

"Let me die, let me die –"

Hino did not know what pained Guriko so much.

All she knew was that, every night, Guriko would be haunted by her nightmares.

Hino felt so sorry for Guriko, but she couldn't enter her dream to save her.

As she smoothed Guriko's hair, she wondered –

Why would I cherish Guriko so much, when she's not my child? Is this emotion genuine? For me, who had faked everything, is it still possible to love someone else? This child, this fake child; though I tried my best to pretend to love her –

Could that emotion be genuine?

"…"

Hino silently raised her arm.

If I am to put my hand over Guriko's neck right now and squeeze –

"…"

Hino's fingers touched the skin on Guriko's neck, but she couldn't put any strength into her hands.

The blood beneath her fingers was endlessly pulsing along the arteries in Guriko's neck.

She was alive.

However, contrary to Hino's stalled actions, Guriko was urging her to commit to the action from the depths of her dreams.

"Kill me."

"…"

Hino placed her hands around Guriko's neck, and sank into quiet contemplation.

Why can't my fingers tighten?

Why can't I do it?

"Guriko-chan."

Why… am I crying?

I don't understand, and Kio isn't beside me.

"Kill me."

As Guriko muttered to herself, tears also gleamed in her tightly closed eyes.

The last rays of the setting sun poured in through the curtains, and gently enveloped the stationary duo.

"Don't cry, Guriko-chan."

With a sudden feeling of fatigue, Hino let go of her hands on Guriko's neck as she wept with Guriko. Almost unconsciously, she muttered the true thoughts in her mind: "Mom is here."

Was it a coincidence? Guriko sighed with contentment, temporarily left his nightmares, and stared to breathe evenly.

“I – I –”

Hino couldn’t bear it any longer. Putting her hands to her face, she screamed with frustration.

“I… can’t do it!”

Tears welled out without end.

These tears and this emotion were the only truths that the fake Itsuwara Hino could feel.

Silently, the boudoir simply enveloped this pair of fake mother and daughter in its melancholy.

Night 4: I Can’t Hear the Bells

It was over quickly.

The Long-Armed Demon lost surprisingly quickly against Mina; she was not even good enough to be the other woman’s opponent.

Her legs were broken, her shoulders were crushed, and her heart was filled with fear. That monstrous girl wasn’t even able to put up anything resembling resistance! No, she wasn’t allowed to.

Since Rinne couldn’t understand everything, she began thinking about what had just happened.

Long-Armed Demon likely noticed danger, and struck first against Mina who was preparing to speak to the Meat Doll; she probably planned to use those strong, invisible fists to beat Mina down.

But her movements were easily foiled.

Mina's expressions were graceful as she turned slightly and dodged the fist and pressed the spray can in her hand — a silver mist was released with a sound of "Shhhh".

Long-Armed Demon's expression changed in that instant.

She showed shock and, as if putting all her effort into one single action, screamed.

But there was still no movement.

Mina leisurely walked in front of her and fiercely stomped right on her body. That was it, probably… That was it.

Her abdomen hit with a strong blow, Long-Armed Demon flipped over and fell on the bumpy road where she rolled a few times. She remained like that, not moving and possibly unconscious.

Long-Armed Demon was definitely not weak. She was the Long-Armed Demon who killed ten people. She was a monstrous existence with superhuman abilities.

But she was silenced effortlessly by Mina, who didn't so much as bat an eyelid.

"Seeing invisible things is something that I'm good at." Only Saibara Mina's eyes were smiling as she spoke coldly. "Ah, what a bad match, Long-Armed Demon. But that isn't important. You are no longer a threat. Actually, I wanted to leave you be for a while while I investigate a few things, but it seems I can't do that anyway."

Mina once again turned toward the Meat Doll after she finished saying something incomprehensible.

The fragmented cluster of flesh with no determinable gender, which was destroyed by the Long-Armed Demon, had already completely recovered. Mina's expression was impassive despite facing that hideous visage. She ignored Rinne, who was lying by her feet and shivering with fear, and spoke to the Meat Doll: "Alright, Meat Doll,

let me hear your explanation. Why did you disregard my orders and protected Usagawa Rinne? Based on your response, I will — no, haha, you should know even if don't say it, right?"

Her words brought immeasurable fear to the Meat Doll. The Meat Doll startled with fright, and surprisingly responded with human speech.

"My reason was, since the Long-Armed Demon's target also seemed to be Usagawa Rinne's Fragment, I believed the Fragment might be taken away if I do not first eliminate Long-Armed Demon."

"Oh?" Mina showed a look of surprise. "She was after the Fragment? There are people beside us who want those things? It seems Long-Armed Demon should have a Fragment… But even if she gets more than two Fragments, she'd just destroy her sensory organs and die. Then again — maybe she mistook the Fragments' function?"

Mina seemed to accept the Meat Doll's words. Perhaps from habit, she once again started talking to herself.

"I thought the Meat Doll malfunctioned, but it seems I was too suspicious. Besides, that thing's just a pile of flesh. How could it possibly have thoughts of protecting others?"

"…"

The Meat Doll was silent. Was she being too suspicious? Its features seemed rather human. There wasn't any energy left for thinking as pain wrecked Rinne's train of thought. She wanted to puke. This incomprehensible situation. This agonizing pain taking over her body.

And fear.

The extreme fear she held toward the woman before her made her nauseous.

"So," Mina ended her pondering and sneered at Rinne, "why hello. Thanks for lending me your cell phone. It was good finding you, but I couldn't see any phones nearby. At the end, I couldn't just watch and showed myself. However, since I ensured you can be eliminated, it was a good outcome."

"Fshuu—" The sound of breathing could be heard from Mina's

mouth every time she took a breath.

She's like an alien species, Rinne thought. Her body, her thought processes, they were all completely different. She was an existence even stranger than the Meat Doll beside her.

Why didn't Rinne notice this abnormality upon sight?

She was — extremely dangerous.

More dangerous than Snake, more dangerous than Long-Armed Demon, more dangerous than just about anybody.

Saibara Mina asked Rinne with a smile. "I'll gonna ask you something. If you answer honestly, you'll live a bit longer."

She was definitely not lying. She should able to kill Rinne without batting an eye. Even with immortality granted from eating an Apple, Rinne would be easily disposed of.

Mina was, without doubt, that type of being.

"What is it?"

"Tell me… What happened," Mina sniggered and asked with a calm voice, "one month ago?"

Sakaki. Guriko.

The faces of these important people flashed before Rinne's mind.

Ah. She would never see them again. She couldn't go back.

I just had to meet her.

Aizawa Ume was a girl whose hands weren't skilled.

When she cooked, she would scorch the bottom the pan and cut her finger. When she tried arts and crafts, she could never finish properly, making flawed products that would fall apart with a light blow.

What were these fingers doing?!

She was always miserable.

To eliminate that misery, the wicked God had given her—

“In—the—clear—night—”

With the singing voice came a robber with an abnormal expression. Just a robber. Even if it made it into the newspaper, it would be forgotten within a week; it was a normal case the likes of which occurred all the time. The robber killed Ume’s parents, and, possibly gotten addicted to killing, he decided to slowly torture the surviving girl to death. He pushed her down and lifted his bloody kitchen knife. He cut, starting from her fingertips, and Ume lost consciousness numerous times.

She was not forgiven no matter how she cried and screamed. No one came to save her.

In quick succession, her fingers, then hands, then arms were cut off and dropped by her parents’ corpses on the ground.

Her arms were cut off from the shoulder.

Ah—

She couldn’t remember what happened afterward.

When she came to, she had gained those omnipotent arms.

She ecstatically tore the robber into pieces, then fell unconscious.

Upon wakening, an unfamiliar man said: “Welcome to our world!”

At that moment, she understood beyond doubt.

She could not go back.

“Ah.”

When she was fully awake, the sunlight was slanted and a crimson sunset dyed the world in bright shades. Long-Armed Demon felt pain in her legs and stomach, wondering if she was defeated yet again. As she started to get up —

“Huh?”

She couldn’t get up.

How strange. She wanted to use her arms to pull herself back up.

She felt nothing.

Completely confused, she tried again.

“Hey, hey, I need to stand up, I can’t keep lying down like this. Ooh, if I don’t get up I can’t go back.”

She felt nothing.

She felt nothing.

She felt nothing.

“Hey, hmm, I need to get up and go back.”

Her arms.

“Back to Zeki-kun.”

Her arms were gone.

Long-Armed Demon fell silent, and then began whimpering.

“Waahh…”

Tears flooded from her eyes and dripped from her cheeks.

“My arms, my arms, my arms…..”

No, I really don’t want this. Arms, I don’t have arms. If I don’t have those long and powerful arms… I won’t be Long-Armed Demon. I’ll return to being the weak and clumsy Aizawa Ume.

And then she would be abandoned by Zekiguchi.

“No! No no no!”

With desperation filling her, Long-Armed Demon started sobbing.

“No…”

Zekiguchi, who gave her a haven despite her transformation into a monster, who accepted and praised her, who said said “Let’s keep living on together”. Zekiguchi Nashinori…

I wanna go back to him.

Go back and be praised by him.

Until now it had always been like this; it was Long-Armed Demon's only and greatest joy.

However —

These arms that lost feeling quietly rejected her.

— Arms.

"My arms are gone."

Long-Armed Demon mumbled vacantly, lying on the ground. And somewhere on the uneven road in the direction of her head…

"Thump", a footstep.

"Zeki-kun?"

Long-Armed Demon's heart almost stopped from fear as she shut her eyes tight.

No.

No no no no.

If she were to be abandoned by Zekiguchi now… She would rather just die. Her greatest fear was for him to say, "I don't need you."

Long-Armed Demon trembled and cried, apologizing with overwhelming, catastrophic fear.

"I'm sorry, I"m sorry, don't abandon me, please don't abandon me."

"This world —"

Suddenly.

Because the voice was not one she had heard before, Long-Armed Demon opened her eyes.

"Huh?"

Looking at the person, it seemed to be someone she had seen somewhere before. The man's side fringe made his face seem like a monster's. He took out a cell phone and began dialing.

"— Really has too many melancholic things."

“You —”

Even though she called out to him to address him, he lazily asked her without even giving his name: “Long-Armed Demon, can you really not use your arms now?”

“Ah…”

Struck at her weak point, Long-Armed Demon gritted her teeth and pushed back tears. But she couldn’t hold them back and she started crying.

Seeing her like this, the man nodded his head as if in understanding and spoke formally into his phone. “Ah — Hello, sorry to trouble you. I’m Nageki, Nageki Kurukiyo. Ah, right, right, I’ll tell you the place now, so please come quickly. What? We need an ambulance for this, though it’s probably already too late.”

Long-Armed Demon understood.

He seemed to be a policeman. She had never felt the slightest fear toward any policemen and never paid any attention to them. But she would definitely be arrested under the current circumstances.

So it will end like this, Long-Armed Demon thought.

Zekiguchi would never save her now that she had lost her ability.

Just as she began to lose spirit, Nageki said something as if it were natural.

“Ah, right, dead, one little girl.”

“Eh?” Dead? She wasn’t dead yet, so who died?

“Right, it looks like — her arms were snapped off, and her shoulders were crushed.”

Who was —

“She was murdered by having her heart torn out.”

— That?

The night was filled with nightmares, and falling asleep was

impossible.

Ever since she started living separately from Rinne, she had been plagued with nightmares. Sometimes it was the faces of those she had killed, sometimes it was the scene of countless eyeballs wriggling about. Though there were no definite images, it was still so painful.

It was during a night like this, a night when sleep was impossible.

Gankyū Eguriko woke up in her dark room in the home where she lived together with the Itsuwara couple. Her bed was soft, and she used a sky-patterned quilt. She glanced at the clock with spoons as its hands; it pointed at 2:00am.

"……"

Covered in cold sweat and feeling nauseous, Guriko decided to bathe. Thinking that she shouldn't wake Hino and Kio, she quietly walked toward the door.

Those two are seriously naive. They're so innocent that I lowered my guard. I don't know if I can keep considering them my parents. Now that I think about it, even now I don't really understand what parents are.

If I ask them, they'll just laugh and say it's easy.

"— These "parents", that's us."

They were truly idiots without common sense. Since it was too ridiculous, Guriko decided to stop thinking about it and just learn, bit by bit. Living with them wouldn't be unpleasant.

It was a night when she was prepared to accept the current situation.

She noticed them speaking softly in the living room.

The voices were filled with sorrow, completely unlike the frenzied excitement from before. They seemed to be sad.

"— I.. can't do it, I can't stand it anymore."

That was Hino's voice. Was taking care of Guriko, a child who was both human and monster, a burden for her after all? Guriko thought it over, and an empty feeling that even she could not understand assaulted her heart.

“— But…

“— I can’t kill her.”

Hino murmured, and Kio replied.

“— Hino, that won’t do. If we refuse to kill her, we will be killed by that person.”

“— Being killed is fine; either way, Kio, you definitely can’t kill Guriko-chan either. You obviously care about her more than I do.”

Hino’s voice sounded almost like she was crying.

“— Besides, you say we’ll be killed, but for a long time we’ve already —”

Then, she woke up.

It seemed like a scene concocted in a dream. Thanks to this, she did not have a nightmare in its place. But those half-digested, nauseating thoughts kept floating in her mind and she felt terrible. Like in her dream, Guriko woke in the darkness.

Her mind was heavy.

That conversation — that night, what did that couple’s conversation mean? Saying things like killing me, or being killed — I don’t understand it. In short, feeling an indescribable nausea, Guriko unhappily stared at the ceiling.

She didn’t go to school and even refused to pick up the phone when Rinne called.

She merely shut herself in her room like a recluse.

Ignoring Hino or Kio’s concern, she did not leave even when called for meals.

“Ah, what’s the problem; really, I’m so weak it’s disgusting.”

There was a choice before her.

That choice was between the options that the man with wolf-like eyes called Zekiguchi Nashinori outlined.

Keep on living as a human like this?

Or to live as a monster?

Rinne, Hino, Sakaki, Kio… if she wanted to protect those important to her.

“My being near them will create danger?”

I know how cruel I am. I’m no different from Long-Armed Demon who killed ten people. In fact, I am worse than her. I have a twisted heart that wants to hurt others’ bodies. My true identity is that of an eyeball-gouging monster.

There’s no way I can talk about this with people like Rinne; if they knew these things, they would despise me and fear me. The number of eyeballs that I’ve gouged out is probably even greater than what they ever imagined.

Rinne.

“I am a monster.”

Guriko crawled out of her bed and leaned her head against the wall. As if groaning, she murmured in a low voice, “Three hundred years ago, I grew tired of living, abandoned my human restraint and went on a wild massacre. Rinne, there were children of your own age, infants who weren’t old enough to speak, and couples who loved each other. I gouged out that much happiness. Haha, an eyeball-gouging monster…”

A single tear flew from Guriko’s eye.

“How could I deserve any sort of happiness…”

Someone had decided to be “the person most important to me” a month ago. But I don’t deserve to be with them. I have taken so much on my journey, killed so many. I don’t even know if I will go berserk again and target Rinne’s eyeballs.

“Rinne, Sakaki.”

I will travel.

“I like you.”

Go somewhere far away. Being here is too painful. This happy world is suffocating me. School, home, all this happiness of a normal life —It’s too painful for a monster like me.

I can't depend on them.

Go somewhere far away.

Sakaki will definitely protect Rinne. He doesn't need me. If I rely on them I will only bring them misfortune.

"If only I depart, it'll be fine…"

Humans and monsters cannot live together.

She was a monster.

The same as Long-Armed Demon.

"….."

Upon that resolution, she calmed down.

At this moment, Guriko's heart made the decision.

Therefore, Gankyū Eguriko would choose that option.

Her only necessities would be spoons. She would once again walk that old path. Wandering from place to place, looking for those with Apples, keeping them far away from Mushi —

Drunk with self-satisfaction, she would gradually cease to think.

That would be good. Only that would be acceptable, I'm already tired. I wanna become a monster again.

Opening the door, she found no one in the darkness. Perfect. Though she felt sorry toward Hino and Kio, she took this opportunity to leave. An ending like this would be a bit cold or perhaps hurt them, and she felt apologetic for it. However, the whole thing was impossible from the start.

Guriko apologized in her heart. Thinking that "I'll at least leave a note so they won't worry", she reached out to the notepad next to the telephone.

It was then that she finally noticed Hino collapsed on the floor.

"Hino?"

No response. Guriko approached and shook the woman in an apron.

She was still alive, but what happened? Last time Guriko saw her she was still healthy. Speechless, Guriko gazed toward the ceiling.

What do I do? What do I do? Aahh, I can't think straight.

"Right, call an ambulance."

When someone's injured or sick and it's an emergency, just call an ambulance and they'll take the person to the hospital for free. Hino taught me that.

Guriko nodded and headed for the phone.

She punched the keys harshly, telling herself that this was the last time, that she would say goodbye after this.

The ambulance arrived a while later and she went in with Hino.

Guriko would face the worst possible truth soon in the hospital.

Sakaki had emptied his gun upon hearing this news. He destroyed the phone that delivered the news and rushed out of the school at a speed above human limits. After using his extraordinary skill to beat up the educational director who tried to stop him from leaving before his work was done, he forcibly waved over a car that was passing by. Since his gun was empty, he used the gun itself to knock down the driver and hijacked the car before speeding to the hospital that contacted him.

Everything that happened afterward was gone from his memory.

His mind was blank. and the whole world turned white. Uncontrollable anger emanated from his entire body. If he didn't control himself, he would have indiscriminately ran over anyone he saw. Ignoring all traffic laws, he arrived at the hospital and pushed his way to the hospital room he was directed to.

Total darkness.

It was a completely black room.

Sakaki didn't need to think. He could understand just by looking at the scene in front of him. A wide room, a soft-looking hospital bed, an absence of medical equipment. That was to be expected — Sakaki's beloved, the young woman Usagawa Rinne, was lying on

the bed with a deathly pallor. This was a true death.

“Sakaki.”

A small voice came from behind him.

As if frozen in place, Sakaki turned around expressionlessly.

There stood a person. In the background, the full moon shone brightly through a window, concealing the person’s appearance. But he knew it was not God. Since it was not God, then that person could not save Usagawa Rinne.

“Move.”

The shadow spoke curtly.

Sakaki stayed standing by the prone Rinne’s feet, unmoving, unable to respond.

The shadow was Guriko. Her face was at the level of Sakaki’s chest, and her head was lowered so her expression could not be seen.

“Move it.”

She spoke with a coarse voice.

With trembling shoulders and a shaking voice, she —

“I’m sorry, Sakaki, I’m sorry.”

— apologized. For some reason, tears flowed down Guriko’s expressionless face.

“Move.”

She said it for the third time.

With heavy, stone-stiff legs, Sakaki moved out of the way and let her pass. In this frosty atmosphere that seemed to belong in a fantasy world, there was no sound.

“I just checked, the Apple that Rinne had has disappeared. It was definitely taken away. I’m afraid that someone might have tortured her to get her to give up the Apple.”

After Guriko walked over to Rinne’s side, she held out her hand and

shut her eyes.

Light. A dull light shone from Rinne's body.

"One month ago."

Guriko spoke in a coarse voice, so quiet that she was almost not heard. As her back was turned to Sakaki, he couldn't tell what kind of expression she had.

"I took two Apples from Snake. One was Snake's own Apple, and the other was the Apple he stole from Rinne. Just now, I put one of those into Rinne's body."

Guriko's shoulders trembled as she touched Rinne's body, her fingertips glowing with a dull light.

"Why? Why isn't she reviving?"

The light disappeared in an instant, but Rinne did not wake up.

Even the miraculous Apple could not save Usagawa Rinne.

"Why….."

Guriko stood idly in place, clenching her fists with seemingly enough force to draw blood.

"Why didn't I notice it… Haha, hahaha, I was too busy anguishing over my own issues to even notice the danger Rinne was in —"

She laughed out loud, staring for a while at Rinne, who did not move at all. Then, she turned to Sakaki, showing no emotion on her face. Those deep black eyes, like gun barrels mixed with red, burned with the desire to bring ruin to everything in the world.

"Sakaki, kill me. Slash off my limbs, snap my neck, dig out my eyeballs, mush my brain… If I'm still alive then grind my entire body to bits and burn it until there's nothing left. Let nothing of this useless body remain in this world!"

Guriko was close to insanity, pointing her tightly gripped spoon at herself. The utensil, shining with a cruel luster, was directed straight at her eyes.

"Useless things! These eyes that can't see anything, these eyes that couldn't see the danger Rinne was in. I don't want them!"

Facing the girl who seriously wanted to gouge out her own eyeballs, Sakaki said in a low voice, “Stop…”

He twisted her arms and snatched the spoon away. Her mind blank, her heart desperate, her thoughts all but collapsed, she slowly lost herself towards the idea of suicide.

Probably annoyed at the interruption, Guriko angrily started at Sakaki.

“Stop.”

Seeing Sakaki’s expression, Guriko hung her head in defeat.

Silence surrounded them, covering both their spirits and their bodies, so much that the silence itself seemed deafening. Sakaki proceeded to coarsely scream and pounded on the wall.

This wouldn’t bring redemption, nor would it allow Rinne to return from the dead.

It was even less possible for their mood to improve as a result.

But despite that —

“Let’s go look.”

Sakaki declared softly.

Even though I decided to protect her. A year ago at the sea, I decided to protect the girl named Usagawa Rinne. This is just returning to the beginning. I don’t need anything at all. I just wholeheartedly want Rinne to return to the life she had been living.

With a sharp aura emanating from his eyes, Sakaki placed his hand on Guriko’s shoulder.

“Let’s go look for a way to save Rinne. There should be some way. If we give up here, it will truly be over… God, ‘Mushi’, Apples of Eden — this world is filled with incomprehensible things. There must be something that can save milady…”

Even though it was a faint wish less reliable than a spider’s web.

Sakaki could only rely on it. Guriko also nodded and drew close to him, staring straight into his eyes.

Already, the atmosphere of despair from before had disappeared, replaced with one brimming with hope.

“That’s true…” With eyes still shining with brilliance, she said something that would never have escaped her lips in the past. “Sensei, thank you — I see a little bit of hope now.”

“Don’t only call me sensei during times like this, idiot.”

“I apologize. I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt like calling you sensei.”

A beautiful smile appeared on Guriko’s face.

She suddenly turned her head.

“But, Sakaki, don’t come.”

“Why not?”

Don’t come? Sakaki seemed about to burst. Who did she think she was talking to? No matter who or what stood in his way, if it was for Rinne, he would brave any danger; that was Sakaki Guryū.

There was no way Guriko that didn’t understand this. Even so, she firmly stared at him.

“Sakaki, please don’t make me repeat myself.”

She turned around and opened the hospital room’s door.

“Don’t look. Because from now on I will return to being a monster.”

This kind of treatment was excessive.

A collar was placed around her neck.

“…..”

This small room reeking of tobacco was depressing. Did the owner of this room have a mountain climbing hobby? Maps and pictures of mountains were all over the place. It didn’t fit together at all. As Long-Armed Demon thought this, she curled up like an abandoned puppy and remained alert to her surroundings.

Her eye, which was covered with an eye patch to speed its recovery, had all but totally regenerated. Her sight had returned to normal.

This was the room of that detective, who looked like a hair-demon himself and captured Long-Armed Demon. It was a 4-tatami sized room with only a bathroom attached to it. The simple kitchen inside the room was stacked full of recently washed dishes. The room was extremely clean. Contrary to his appearance, it seemed that detective was actually quite meticulous.

The room's light was on.

The room's owner was nowhere to be found.

"Zeki-kun…"

Though she tried to break the collar on her, she couldn't feel her arms. Long-Armed Demon sighed and tears appeared in her eyes out of restlessness. Her one and only pride — her arms — were gone. In her sadness, the loss of that which she depended on created a sense of hollowness.

Zekiguchi would definitely not need a Long-Armed Demon like this anymore.

She would be discarded.

When she thought that, she felt even more lonely and even more miserable as tears flooded down her cheeks.

After losing to that scary woman who was both like an angel and a demon and had her arms were somehow removed, that detective picked up the crying Long-Armed Demon and brought her here. That detective was obviously a law enforcement agent, but he didn't throw her in jail. Instead, he brought Long-Armed Demon to his room after saying some some strange things. Then he bound her with a collar and leash.

The leash was randomly attached to a pillar. Though it was a simple restraint, the armless Long-Armed Demon had no ways to escape. But this seemed even weirder than normal restraints. Rather, it seemed as if she were being treated like a dog. Upset, Long-Armed Demon cried and moaned and cursed the detective at the same time.

What would happen from now on?

Even if she wasn't in prison, her situation was pretty similar and possibly even worse. That policemen exuded an ominous air that even Long-Armed Demon found gloomy, and she had no idea what he would do to her. Out of fear, Long-Armed Demon faintly called for help.

"Zeki-kun…"

That sound could not have been heard by anyone. It dissipated into the air after reaching the walls.

Long-Armed Demon felt the tatami's coldness, shuddering constantly while waiting for something to change.

She didn't know how much time had passed.

She finally stopped crying, though her cheeks ached from the tears poured onto them.

"Ah man, sorry for coming home so late."

The door suddenly opened and the odd detective appeared. In his hand was a bag filled with food, clothes, and underwear. Furthermore, the clothes and underwear seemed like they were for Long-Armed Demon to wear. Clearly, the detective planned to keep her in captivity for a long time.

Long-Armed Demon paled.

"Aaah, when a person looking like me go shopping for children's clothing, people think I'm a criminal. However, while the housewives wer whispering to each other 'Maybe we should call the police', I managed to buy your underwear and everything else."

This person was a pervert.

That's right. This guy was the worst type of pervert. He would definitely do some unimaginably perverted things to her.

Long-Armed Demon's back stiffened with fear and she whimpered like a little dog.

The perverted detective completely ignored her and laughed vulgarly, "Gigigi. Don't be so guarded against me. No matter how cautious you are, I'm stronger than you right now. Since that's the

case, I suggest you act cute to keep me in a good mood rather than risk angering me with defiance."

Yes, the Long-Armed Demon who killed ten people while spreading death and fear throughout Kannonsakazaki no longer existed. The person trembling on the ground was a small child without arms, someone weaker than even an average human.

Long-Armed Demon understood that, but she refused to surrender. She glared angrily at her adversary and bluffed with all her might.

"What the hell are you? What are you trying to do to the Long-Armed Demon? D-don't come any closer. Long-Armed Demon will never obey you. If you do anything weird to me, I'll bite you! I'll kick you!"

Facing Long-Armed Demon, who angrily tried to hide her fear, the detective looked through a gap in his hair with a seemingly joyful expression.

"Gigigi. Don't worry. Though it's really easy to misunderstand me based on my appearance, I'm actually a normal, kind person. I don't have any supernatural abilities and when it's time for me to die, I'd die quickly."

He suddenly seemed to remember something and finally said: "Speaking of which, I still haven't told you my name. I am Nageki Kurukiyo and I'm a detective. However, since I've hid a serial murderer in my home instead of turning her in, I'm not really qualified to call myself that anymore."

Long-Armed Demon didn't respond, but she understood this person really did not intend to take her to the police station. Then what was he after? She suspiciously glared at the horrifying detective who called himself Nageki.

"Kurukiyo, what are you planning to do?"

"Plans? Ahh, I wasn't thinking of doing anything bad. It's just that — this world has too many melancholic things and I want to reduce that melancholy by a little bit, Aizawa Ume-chan."

Long-Armed Demon's face distorted at suddenly hearing her real name.

"Why?"

“Aizawa Ume was involved in a robbery incident three years ago. It was unclear whether she survived or not and her whereabouts were unknown. She would turn eleven this year if she is still alive. Her parents died during the incident and so did the robber. However, since the sole daughter Ume-chan was nowhere to be found, the police conducted an extensive search. Despite that, no one knows what happened to her even to this day.”

After that detailed statement, Nageki smiled mysteriously: “By researching that tombstone you slept by, I learned of this melancholic event. I have no proof, but it seems that I’m not wrong from your reaction, Aizawa Ume-chan.”

“Don’t call me by that name!”

Trembling, Long-Armed Demon forced out those words.

Nageki cheerfully chuckled. “Hehe”.

“What? You want me to call you Long-Armed Demon? Using that name for you, who has no arms, is rather laughable. You should know that.”

“But,” Long-Armed Demon lowered her head, tears flowing from her closed eyes, “But I’m Long-Armed Demon. I can’t not be Long-Armed Demon…”

Nageki sighed and shook his head as if her expression perhaps reminded him of something. He started putting the food he bought into the refrigerator. It seemed he cooks for himself as he only bought fresh vegetables and raw meat, without any bentos or prepared dishes. For some reason, he also bought three cardboard packages of coffee-flavored milk.

“You might need to calm down a bit.”

Nageki continued reasonably: “Go take a bath. You don’t bath much with the way you’ve been living, right? Clean yourself up, wipe away your tears and the smell of blood, eat something, and go to sleep early today.”

Though it was an unexpected request, Long-Armed Demon sort of agreed with it. Up until then, she could only use tap water in the cemetery to clean off the blood and sweat that made her body sticky. Occasionally she would want to soak in hot water, allowing her body to warm up.

Long-Armed Demon felt quite hungry. She had not yet lost her sense of hunger or her ability to feel. According to Zekiguchi, suffering a single fatal injury would make one quickly lose such senses. Since Long-Armed Demon almost died when Gankyū Eguriko dug out her eyeballs, she should have pretty much been rid of those senses by now.

Let's not worry about that right now, I wanna take a bath.

"You'll let Long-Armed Demon take a bath?"

"Yeah, but this room doesn't have a bath tub, so we have to go to a bath house. Is that okay?"

"Wha —"

Bath house - he meant a public bath. That would rather annoying. Her armless body would receive even more strange looks than usual at those sorts of places.

Maybe Long-Armed Demon's timid face made him think of something as Nageki smiled tenderly. "Don't worry. The owner of the nearby public bath is an old friend of mine. I stopped by on my way back and reserved the place for an hour."

"Ah, even so," as if pushing Long-Armed Demon, who had found some new hope, into the Abyss, Nageki smiled. "Yes, there's no way you can bathe by yourself, right? I'll wash you thoroughly from head to toe. Mmhmm, even if a suspicious detective brings a girl with him to the men's bath, even if that girl's wearing a collar, no one will care — gigigi —"

Long-Armed Demon's body instantly stiffened and she suddenly leaned back, making the bells on her collar tinkle. She trying to get away from Nageki. The perverted detective joyfully approached Long-Armed Demon and took hold of her collar.

"Ah!"

"Then let's go, Ume-chan. Hopefully no one will see us on our way to the bath. Don't look at me like this. Even I adhere to what they call the values of society."

"P-per…" Long-Armed Demon shouted at Nageki, who untied her leash and dragged her toward the door. Almost crying, she had an expression filled with utter despair. "Pervert — You're a pervert!"

“Hey, stop shouting. What would happen if a neighbor misunderstands?”

“It doesn’t matter if there’s a misunderstanding. Someone please notice us and help me!”

Despite Long-Armed Demon’s cries, no one came to be her hero during the five-minute walk to the bathhouse.

The following half hour was endless torture for Long-Armed Demon. Resistance was useless. She was brought to the bathhouse. Its owner was apparently blind, as he did not react at all to the odd pair in front of him. The Long-Armed Demon was forcefully dragged into the men’s bath.

She was stripped, rubbed, and placed in the hot water.

Long-Armed Demon’s entire body shook with humiliation.

Wh-when I get my arms back, I’ll make sure to kill Nageki first. I’ll peel off his skin, tear off his limbs, dig out his heart, I’ll mercilessly toss him around until he dies.

She was seen. Everything was seen. She was even scrubbed. Even Zekiguchi had never seen this much. She’d never be able to marry now… She started getting dizzy and couldn’t form complete thoughts. She only felt humiliation, frustration, and she wanted to disappear. With a red face, Long-Armed Demon was submerged up to her neck in the steaming water.

“Flavor of Soup” - this was a classical bathing place with a name sounding like a condiment. In this era of theme-park-styled super bath houses, this kind of normal bath was not very popular. Or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that the facility was insufficient. The place wasn’t anything special. There only the bath itself, which was not particularly large, as well as a sauna to help with aches.

Only the unbelievably high ceiling was different from usual, as one could see steam spiraling upward and upward. The sight was exquisite. As a result, Long-Armed Demon silently watched as if trying to forget her shame.

Nageki, looking as if he did not care, washed himself while shamelessly humming a Beatles song. He was obviously a perverted and melancholic detective; he should be singing the GeGeGe no

Kitaro song!

As she thought this, Long-Armed Demon watched Nageki.

— He was good looking.

His tall, sturdy form was physically excellent, without excess muscle. He was truly handsome. As Long-Armed Demon thought this, she suddenly realized where her thoughts ended up and turned red while hiding under the water.

So warm. The hot water permeated her entire body and it felt like she was being reborn.

She thought about Zekiguchi, and then about that woman who took everything away from her and seemed both like an angel and a demon.

Just thinking about that woman's honey-sweet voice and those eyes that seemed kind while hiding apathetic coldness made the hairs on her back stand up. Such a scary person. As if that person had attacked the public bath, Long-Armed Demon raised her head and gritted her teeth while sighing.

"But, why?"

She seemed similar to Zekiguchi.

Zekiguchi, who had saved her.

The woman who had thrown her into despair.

They were obviously completely different, so why did she feel they were the same type of being?

"Ume-chan, having water up to your neck is bad for your health!"

"Swoosh—" Nageki nonchalantly dropped into the water next to Long-Armed Demon. "Shhh", Long-Armed Demon rapidly shuffled away and shouted, "W-Waah, Kurikiyo! It's way too much if you get any closer to Long-Armed Demon!"

"It's only us here. I can hear you just fine even if you don't scream! Gigi, do you hate me? It always seems like my intimate behavior rubs some people the wrong way. There must be something wrong with their mental structure. This world has far too many melancholic things."

An infuriating smile appeared on Nageki Kurukiyo's face.

Long-Armed Demon saw that face and couldn't help but be surprised.

"Um — Kurikiyo?"

"Mm? That's me. What is it?"

His face —

His hair, which always hid his expression, was now tied to the back. The face that was now visible was beautiful enough that Long-Armed Demon was momentarily enchanted.

"No, who are you?" Long-Armed Demon couldn't resist asking.

Nageki, with bewilderment on his face, suddenly thought of something. Sweeping aside the water, he moved closer. "Are you nearsighted? Can you see me?"

"Waah, didn't I tell you to not come closer?!"

Long-Armed Demon beat back the perverted detective by smartly ramming her head against his, though she also took enough pain to moan. She didn't think Nageki, who tied back his hair, was this good-looking. Since she realized she like his appearance, she felt a sense of defeat.

After staying underwater for a bit, Nageki lazily sat back up and complained.

"Man, that hurt… I hate violence. I've always thought humans are animals that can solve issues by talking them over. Isn't that right?"

"If you want to talk, then try thinking about how I feel a little, idiot! I'll be embarrassed!"

Long-Armed Demon screamed. She felt dizzy and was having difficulty breathing, then took a deep breath.

"Aah, damn. How did it end up like this?"

She truly wanted to go back to Zekiguchi. Even though Zekiguchi had never gotten this close to her and rarely chatted with her.

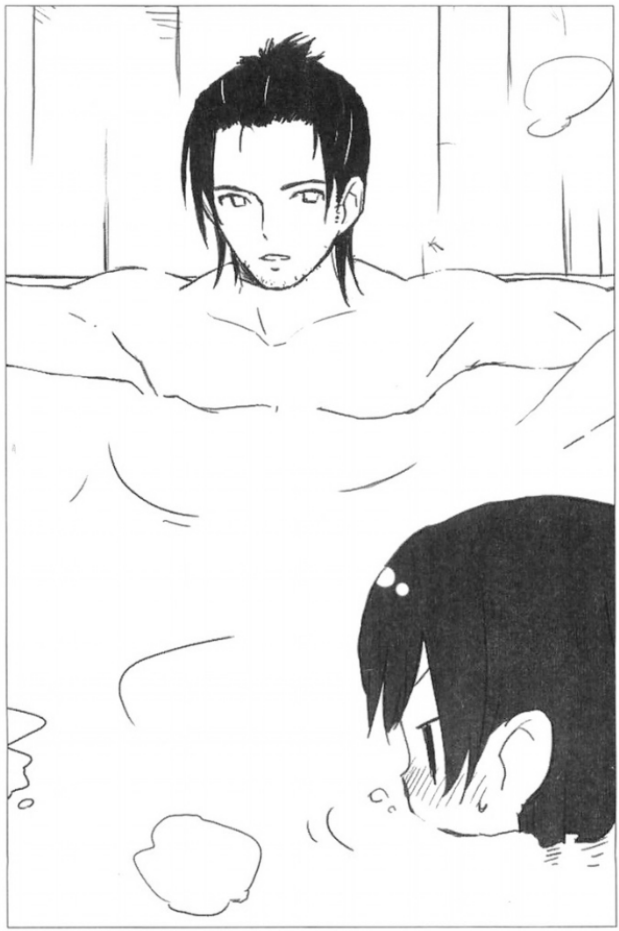
Has it been years since she last talked so unguarded with someone

else? Not as the Long-Armed Demon, but as a human. She thought to herself — and then shook her head, reminding herself that she still could not trust this man. The only people she could trust in this world were Zekiguchi and herself. No one else.

Everyone else was scary. They would bare their fangs at her at the most unexpected times, just like that robber who cut off her arms.

Just as Long-Armed Demon thought this, Nageki unbelievably voiced her thoughts.

“Ah — It’s been so long since I could relax and simply chat with someone. But you still seem to be on guard against me.”



The melancholic detective smiled and looked at Long-Armed Demon.

Those eyes that were always covered by overly long hair, tranquil yet forceful, always seemed a bit frightening.

“Okay, then let’s chat like humans. Me? I don’t just do this kind of thing out of curiosity. If someone finds out that I’m hiding the Long-Armed Demon, who killed ten people, then don’t even talk about getting fired. It wouldn’t be odd if I were tossed into prison.”

That was true. Long-Armed Demon lowered her face, as now was the not the time to be embarrassed about being naked. Why did that man approach her? If this wasn’t cleared up, then she wouldn’t be able to be at ease.

Long-Armed Demon looked at Nageki, who nodded lightly.

“This world — has too many melancholic things.”

Perhaps it was his catchphrase? He uttered this profound sentence for the who-knows-how-many-th time.

“It’s just… should I say it is reminiscing, or is it more like opening up old wounds? Ume-chan, my girlfriend was also inconvenienced by her disabled body.”

Nageki looked at her. Unhappy at being seen naked, Long-Armed Demon lowered herself up to her neck into the murky hot water. Due the Apple’s power, her skin had regenerated right over the rough wounds where her arms were cut off. Supposedly,it would normally be possible to regenerate her arms with an Apple, but Long-Armed Demon’s Apple for some reason refused to restore those two arms.

Instead, she received a pair of invisible arms stronger than just about anyone else’s.

She finally realized now, after losing that ability, that only with arms could she live life like a normal person. Lacking a body part was incredibly restricting. If one was to measure the utility of hands, it would be about a hundred for skillful people, and even the most clumsy person would score about fifty. But for someone without arms at all, of course it could not be anything but zero. Overcoming such an obstacle would be incredibly difficult.

Looking at her, Nageki showed a sorrowful expression.

“Do you know about that incident of a gigantic monster wreaked havoc near the town about a month ago?”

A gigantic monster.

That must have the “Dream World Beast” Zekiguchi had been talking about. Having taken interest in the event, Zekiguchi investigated and learned of Usagawa Rinne’s name. Under the pretense of amassing Apples, he ordered Long-Armed Demon to take away her Apple.

In the end, she was defeated.

“My girlfriend was stepped on and killed by that monster.”

“…”

Because she didn’t understand what he said, Long-Armed Demon simply looked at Nageki.

“What?”

Nageki, with hollow and vacant eyes, gazed at the steam spiraling up toward the ceiling. “No one could have foreseen something like that, right? Obviously, I couldn’t do anything. My girlfriend was flattened by that oversized monster. By the time I noticed and went over, only her crushed, bloody upper body, her paralyzed feet, and her wheelchair were left.”

Nageki softly spoke.

“I can’t let it go.”

Long-Armed Demon couldn’t respond. Up until now, she had repeatedly committed acts no different from those of the Dream World Beast. People like Nageki, who had their important others taken away from them without reason, must also harbor regret in their hearts and despise Long-Armed Demon.

With a face full of grief, Nageki ever-so-slightly smiled. “So that others would not hold the same kinds of regret I do, I want to eliminate unreasonable melancholy — monsters. That’s all. Even though I’m just a weak human, a mouse will bite a cat when forced into a corner. I want to show the strength of us weak humans to the

monsters out there.”

How scary. The melancholic detective’s terrible gaze looked straight at her.

“I’ll get to the point. What are you?”

That’s something even I don’t know.

Long-Armed Demon looked downward and said softly, “If you go too deeply into this, Kurukiyo, you’ll die!”

“Gigigi. I know, but I can’t stop now. Aside from what happened with my girlfriend, my subordinate was killed by you. He told me that his most important person was also killed by a monster. I must do his part for him in opposing monsters.”

“Subordinate?”

It was that incident?

“You’re talking about — a policeman?”

“Yeah. He didn’t work directly under me, but in terms of rank he was below me. He was my friend and helped me look for Long-Armed Demon during the night. However, his entire body was annihilated, with only his wrists remaining… I believe that you did this, right?

Annihilated.

What does that mean? Long-Armed Demon didn’t have an ability like that, and she didn’t remember fighting with a policeman. Therefore, from what she knew, the policeman was killed by a monster that wasn’t Long-Armed Demon.

A face appeared in her mind.

“Kurukiyo.”

Long-Armed Demon quietly voiced a warning. “Long-Armed Demon didn’t do that. It was someone even stranger. It was probably — that terrifying woman who made Long-Armed Demon’s ability disappear…”

Though she didn’t remember what her name was, she could remember her overwhelming aura that was like both an angel and a

demon.

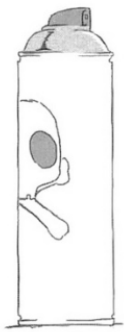
“That strangeness… she probably wasn’t human or monster. She was something even more abnormal, living in an even stranger plane than the world we monsters stay in…”

She was not worried about Kurukiyo.

She was just accurately saying what she believed.

“Therefore, Kurukiyo, you can’t go near that thing. That thing is not a normal being. It’s something more alien, something higher. No matter if it’s a monster or a human, as long she wishes for it they’ll be immediately killed. It’s like being mechanically eliminated as flaws — like, being sterilized and disinfected…”

Final Night: Start of Disinfection



Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

Those who live by the pen will die by the pen.

All men will die. This was a commonsensical truth recorded in the Bible.

The only immortals were saints and inhumans beings whom we call witches.

In medieval Europe, which was taken over by the viral Witch Hunt

movement, mortality was used to separate witches from humans. The accused were placed into boiling cauldrons. Those who died were humans. Those who lived were witches.

Then I must be a witch, Gankyū Eguriko thought as she walked along the hospital corridor.

This body would not die even if she was sank into boiling water or pierced by innumerable swords. She cannot die no matter how much damage was dealt to her. *But if I am a witch, then I want a magic that can save humans. If my only power is immortality, then I'm not worthy of this existence.*

Death and misfortune always emanated from her person.

She didn't have any memories of where she was born. She was already living with a foster family when she was old enough to have memories. Those family members were soon all killed by the Mushi. Not a single one of them were left.

The Apple holders who traveled with her also left her behind and disappeared.

And now she had also killed her most important person due to her own negligence.

Usagawa Rinne was a girl more gentle than anyone else, and yet so far removed from happiness. Nonetheless, she never hated the world and was never as lost as Guriko. *I love Rinne. I love her because she loves others. I could give up my life for Rinne.*

That was how it should be.

I should be the only unfortunate one.

I should be the one to die.

"Itsuwara-san?"

Not knowing whom the person was addressing, Guriko momentarily ignored it. This dark hospital was very dimly lit. Somehow, none of the the lights were turned on. The heavens outside were darkening and the sapphire nocturnal sky enveloped the entire world.

"Itsuwara Eguriko-san?"

A young female voice was calling out. *Wait, I am Itsuwara. I gave the*

hospital that name when I came here with Hino. Hino… Although I care about Hino's condition, I must find Rinne's killer first. I'll make that person remember my vengeance.

Although I won't be able to change anything by doing this, I can't just walk away without my revenge.

I know that Rinne, ever so gentle, won't want me to do this.

But I have decided to revert to a monster. I'll go travel as soon as I exact my vengeance, and I'll look for a way to resurrect Rinne. It's too painful to stay in the human world. Moreover, a world without Rinne would be even more painful.

Guriko turned her head and realized a nurse was standing there.

It was a woman wearing a nurse's uniform, complete with a hat, surrounded by a chilling aura. She was wearing a hospital mask. Perhaps she was having a cold?

She smiled prettily and shook her long hair braid.

"Hello."

"Oh. Hello."

Guriko glared at her, replying casually. The other woman had a strange aura. Or rather, she had no aura. It was as if she was not alive.

Guriko shook her head and spoke, trying to gauge the other's intention: "How can I help you? I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Oh? Haha, you're in a hurry? Where are you going? Are you really moving forward? Are you not aimlessly, pointlessly wandering lost?"

She muttered something astounding and continued talking as if nothing had happened: "Humans always lose what's most important to them due to that unsightly habit of hesitation. I hate that kind of ugliness. Hey, why don't you humans desire to live in perfection?"

"What do you mean?"

Guriko questioned sharply. The nurse smiled and turned her back to Guriko, then smiling again as she half-turned to talk to Guriko over her shoulder: "Do you know that although the doctors tried their

best, your mother Itsuwara Hino's condition suddenly worsened? She would be in danger if this goes on. Her body is no stranger to death. She had been gravely sick ever since she was young, and she only managed to stay alive by living in seclusion at home."

That –

She heard about that. That was how Hino and Kio met. Hino often took sick leave from school and Kio would visit her at her house. But Hino did say she was just pretending to be sick.

Was she always smiling to hide her pain and anguish so Guriko wouldn't worry?

"She…"

Guriko still couldn't consider Hino as her mother till the end.

But she didn't find those days annoying. There was much more than just pain during the time they spent together. Guriko remembered how Hino and Kio would become so excited around each other. She remembered how absurdly amazed Hino was when she saw the kaleidoscope Guriko casually bought as her birthday gift.

"She decided to keep living on with Kio after they met, and they ended up working for the Sakaki Organisation… they were given the task to be your parents this time. She could not give birth because of her weak body. Therefore, she was determined to love you as her own child – do you know any of this? Did you talk with her seriously for even once? Did you not lock yourself up in your room in such an unsightly way because of how worried you were with yourself, choosing to ignore everything else?"

The terrifying nurse giggled as she kept walking.

"You'd rather not have those eyeballs, right? Especially when they could not see anything at all. Why are you alive? Your life only serves to bring misfortunate to other people."

"Who are –"

You? What are you? What do you know about me?

Guriko considered this and quickly gave chase to the nurse.

But she couldn't reach her. Somehow, she could never reduce this

intricate distance between them. As if she was blocked by an invisible wall, this nurse kept walking forward and remained at a position where Guriko could not reach or approach her.

What is this? Is this fear? Am I afraid to approach this nurse?

“Once upon a time there was a foolish woman,” the nurse did not turn around as she spoke in a low voice mixed with a giggle. “She was obsessed with cleanliness. She locked herself up in her room and disinfected everything over and over, went paranoid about hygiene and didn’t allow anyone else into the room. All alone, she starved to death in her pristine white room, thinking that this was the perfect world. Such a fool! However, to die in that perfect whiteness, that perfect cleanliness, that place so perfectly sterilized and disinfected – that was her supreme happiness.”

Who was she talking about?

“She didn’t bring misfortune to anyone. She didn’t trouble anyone. She died alone, locked up in her room. Compared to you, who live in such ugliness and confusion, she wished to die in that most beautiful white – that woman’s name was Saibara Mina.”

The woman stopped before a hospital room and smiled as she turned her head towards Guriko with a smile.

“You locked yourself in your room because of your petty worries, but then also decided to foolishly wander about so you would keep getting hurt. You are such an ugly existence. Would you win, if

you're facing such perfection? Would you be able to overcome Saibara Mina – in every sense of the term?"

The mysterious nurse walked into the room as she kept talking. Cautiously, Guriko followed her. She found Hino in the room, asleep on a hospital bed.

She looked very haggard.

They did not part for long. Guriko called an ambulance after Hino fainted and arrived at the hospital with her, then Guriko heard about Rinne's death. She had left Hino for no more than three hours.

But Hino already had a deathly pallor on her face.

Standing beside Hino, who was deep asleep, Guriko's face was shadowed with misery.

How could she explain this to Kio?

Judging from her looks, Hino was veritably on the verge of death. Guriko understood her life was about to end. Guriko was anxious because of this understanding.

She knew all humans will die. Humans will always die. It was just a matter of time.

Someone close to her was going to die once again.

Rinne's face appeared before Guriko's eyes – *No,* Guriko thought.

"Hino."

Guriko held Hino's hand, which dangled outside of the bed, and lifted it beside her own cheek. It was icy cold. She didn't manage to repay Hino with familial love, not even once.

She is willing to love me even though we are not related. However, I just refused her out of fear, out of not knowing what to do.

And this is the result.

"Hino –"

Guriko didn't get an answer when she called out Hino's name. She didn't expect one. That was the road Guriko chose.

She was so stubborn and refused them just because of fear.

She could do nothing at the end. She just chose to run away.

“Hino, I –” Holding Hino’s hand, Guriko muttered in a moaning tone: “I’m sorry. I couldn’t return your kindness.”

I was so afraid. This fear made me detached, and it hurt you.

Remembering those ordinary days spent with Hino and Kio, when everyday was so mediocre and only the most mundane things ever happened – those were the important things Guriko left behind a thousand years ago. But now, thanks to those two, Guriko knew how to smile again.

It was something more tender than what her real parents and her foster parents ever gave her a millennium ago.

It was happiness; happiness as precious as a hard-won treasure.

“Mom.”

Guriko muttered to herself as tears quietly flew down her cheeks.

“Mom –”

Hino can’t die. I should be the only unfortunate one. I should be the one to die. I shouldn’t have lived for a thousand years. Why am I still alive? Obviously I can only bring misfortune to others. I can only be miserable. I can only make others miserable.

A thought suddenly appeared to her.

“…”

Silently, Guriko held Hino’s hand and stared at her sleeping face. Her hand then sneaked towards Hino’s chest. She had an idea; an idea that couln make Hino escape death and end her own boring and agonizing life at the same time.

“Do you want an Apple?”

Guriko whispered beside Hino’s ear.

This was the last immortal Apple Guriko had. If she gave it to Hino, then the other woman would certainly escape death. She might even live out the rest of her days with Kio. Guriko can then entrust

everything to Sakaki and allow herself to disappear.

I've lived for a thousand long years.

It is enough. Although I didn't end up getting anything out of it, it is enough.

Giving up on herself with more than a touch of uncertainty, Guriko finally made a decision deep in her heart and said: "I will give my Apple to you –"

Hino jumped up.

What?

Itsuwara Hino jumped up as if she was a jack-in-a-box on a spring and yelled loudly as she grabbed the shoulders of Guriko, who was prepared to end everything. "No! This is a trap!"

"Hino?"

Guriko couldn't understand what was going on. She just let Hino shake her, making sure Hino was still alive. The Apple didn't change hands, but Hino was alive. What was going on? Guriko looked at Hino as Hino gave out a scream.

Guriko turned to look at the nurse standing in the darkness of the hospital room.

"Yes."

A cold voice sounded from there.

Calmly, the nurse stood before Hino, who was cowering in fear.

"How annoying. I was hoping to end this on a splendid note, as it was going to end sooner or later. Yes, even you want to hinder me with your ugliness, want to disobey my command, want to stain my perfection. Never mind. I'll just have to rebuild a different perfection then."

"Shhhhh."

"Guriko-chan, run!"

Hino pushed Guriko away with an astonishing strength. Guriko, surprised, was stunned by this display.

“But this is resistance, no? This is unadulterated betrayal, no? Could you not imagine what would happen – to a doll who disobeyed its creator?”

The nurse muttered as the space around her began to melt. No, it was a white mist emitting out of her body like steam. Was it the nurse uniform that was melting away? Something like a membrane then momentarily concealed her figure.

The white angel shed her skin and the nightmarish white demon showed herself.

She had a long braid and was wearing a tank top with angel wing prints. She also donned a pair of shorts that ended mid-thigh, wore colorful bracelets and wristbands on her arms, and her mouth was covered by a hard dust mask with a primitive design.

Her pristine white hair danced as the woman pronounced her name.

“How stupid. How foolish. There are things in this world that are untouchable and allow no disobedience. I, Sterilization Disinfection, am one of them. You dared to anger me. Fine – those behaviors of yours, so full of familial love, courage, recklessness and foolishness – “

She lifted her spray can towards Hino and smiled like a devil.

“– will be killed, defeated, and annihilated by me.”

At the same time, Sakaki Guryū was plunged into shock and disbelief.

He followed Guriko out of Rinne’s room, but ended up losing her. Casually, Sakaki looked into a room.

He felt strange. He had been feeling rather strange ever since he arrived here.

It was very quiet here. This hospital was silent as death, with absolutely no sound anywhere.

Then –

“Urk.”

The window was wide open, taking in the dark and cold air. The walls were a clean shade of white. Plain beds were placed in the dim unlit room.

This was an ordinary, normal hospital room.

Apart from the casually discarded foot of a child –

“No way…”

Sakaki screamed and moved towards another room. *No way. No way. Something terrible is happening.* A great malice that Sakaki could not predict was spreading itself.

He went to the room across the corridor. There were no sounds and no scents.

The head of an old man was lying on the ground.

“Urgh!”

A chill ran through Sakaki. Unable to control himself, Sakaki screamed impulsively. There was a dead human head on each of the three beds in the room.

What is this?!

“Ha, ha…”

His breath quickened. His heart beat furiously. Sakaki shook his head and sprang out of the in-patient building, heading towards the administration area in the center of the complex. *What is this? What’s going on? Is everyone dead? Everyone!? Did anyone survive?* He looked for survivors, but couldn’t find any.

He walked towards the offices where the doctors, nurses and other staff should be.

Sakaki despaired when he opened the door.

It was pitch black. The room was pitch black.

There were only body parts left. There were hands, feet, and heads.

He needed no more proofs.

Everyone in this place, apart from himself, had been killed.

Sterilization Disinfection sprayed out despair. Looking at the silver mist emitted from the ordinary spray can, Guriko shivered. However, she was all but slumped on the ground. As she prepared to standing back up –

Hino pushed her out even further.

Guriko rolled on the ground towards the door of the room.

“Hino!”

“Guriko-chan –”

For a moment, her gaze crossed with Hino’s.

“Mom –”

She didn’t know if that word reached Hino. She didn’t know if her thoughts reached her, either. Or was even that disconnected?

“_“

Hino soundless moved her lips at the end, as if she wanted to say something to Guriko.

Her body was mercilessly blown apart by the silver mist.

“Ah?!”

They scattered. The remaining fragments of Hino’s body scattered. The cruel silver mist mercilessly took bites out of those fragments.

“Ah….”

She was disappearing. She had completely disappeared.

Hino completely disappeared. She disappeared with her smile, with the laughter of happiness she shared with Guriko and Kio.

“Stop! Don’t go!”

Guriko begged and shouted meaninglessly.

Her shouts echoed ruthlessly. Soon even that sound dispersed and disappeared.

"…"

Silence descended. Guriko stood there, her face emotionless.

What was this? What is going on? What? Guriko couldn't understand it, and she didn't want to understand it. Hino was just there a moment ago. Hino was just there. Even at the end, she was looking at Guriko with that same benevolent face, looking at the messy and unkempt Guriko.

That woman was suddenly blown apart.

The only things remaining were Hino's right hand with its slender wrist, almost otherworldly in this situation.

Her body, enveloped by the silver mist, was carved out together with one corner of her hospital bed. Only a smooth cross-section was left there. Carved out – the entire space was carved out?

What was going on?

Rather, where did Hino end up?

"Ahhh, a failure. That was barely a pass."

"Shhhh."

Sterilization Disinfection looked towards Guriko as she shook the spray can. Her true intentions were ungaugeable on her winsome face, making her spine-chilling terrifying. Her slightly revealing clothes only served to concentrate her aura of terror. Turning her neck with a snapping sound, she said coldly: "I have erased Itsuwara Hino. She will not return. She cannot be resurrected. That is a fact."

Guriko was shivering. *My head hurts. Ahh – my head hurts. I should have lost the sensation of pain. My mind hurts. My soul hurts. My heart hurts.*

Hino, she…

She…

She died protecting me.

"Ahhhh…"

Guriko opened her mouth and glared as she stumbled to stand up again.

“Ahhh, you! You, you dared to – !”

She took a spoon out of her pocket and threw it towards Sterilization Disinfection, who had an emerging smile on her face. It was a familiar move for Guriko, a killing blow. It was a strike she put her entire strength behind, something that had taken lives more than just once.

“So tiresome.”

Sterilization Disinfection didn’t move. Her right hand, which did not hold a spray can, simply twirled.

Her right hand caught the flying spoon.

She caught it?

Impossible. This had never happened in a thousand years.

In front of Guriko, who was gaping in surprise, Sterilization Disinfection giggled.

“Spoons? You plan to combat me, Sterilization Disinfection, using these things barely considered as weapons, these mere cutleries? Listen – did you know that mercy can only be granted by the strong to the weak? How can a mere human hope to use all his strength to fight an angel or a demon?”

Suddenly –

A lethal silver light pierced Guriko’s right eye.

“Ahhhh!!”

Guriko tumbled backwards and moaned as her right eye burned with a searing pain. Feeling with her hand, she realized a spoon was sticking out of her eye socket. Her spoon was thrown back – it was the first time this had happened. She could not see. She was no match for this woman.

“Hey, Gankyū Eguriko, how does it feel to have your own eyeball dug out?”

Sterilization Disinfection smiled merrily and walked towards

Guriko. *No. I can't win. I can't think of a strategy to defeat her and I don't even have the stamina needed.*

Her body shook. *What is this creature?*

It was an alien existence that far exceeded the definition of a monster.

"Hey, is this the end? You're not going to fight anymore? You made me so upset, but you won't let me play any longer? Then –"

She smiled only a few steps away from Guriko, who sat slumped on the ground. "– Allow me to help you get your fighting spirit back. **I** killed Usagawa Rinne."

"I have to praise her. It's rare for me to genuinely praise someone! But Usagawa Rinne did not yield even at the end. No matter how I tortured her, how I made her endure a living hell, she did not reveal anything about you at all."

She…

She made Rinne…

Guriko felt a chill swelling up her chest. This woman killed Rinne. This woman killed Hino. However, she looked as if she was not affected by it at all. She was someone Guriko must risk her own life to defeat. Guriko no longer cared about the disparity between their strengths nor the woman's terrifying abilities.

Kill! Kill! Kill

Her mind was dominated by one thought only.

"Yes," Sterilization Disinfection smiled with satisfaction, "keep on struggling, little worm."

Guriko stood up and took out two spoons, her face completely expressionless. Hino and Kio were the ones who bought her these sparkling silver spoons. Her heart no longer felt sorrow or even hatred. There was only emptiness – she had reverted to who she was before she met Rinne and Sakaki. Her empty eyes, like gun barrels, only stared at the face of the enemy she must defeat.

Therefore, Gankyū Eguriko –

Did not even notice that tears were flowing down her cheeks.

“Die!”

She threw out two spoons almost simultaneously.

“Spoons again?”

Sterilization Disinfection furrowed her brows with some surprise. This time, however, the spoons did not attack directly. One shot up towards the ceiling, and the other towards the floor.

“A mistake? No, it can’t be.” Sterilization Disinfection muttered to herself as she stood composed at the same spot. Carelessly, she did not move and tried to catch the spoons again. That arrogance was her weakness.

They bounced off.

The spoons glided along the roof and floor along the curvature of the scoop and changed directions, striking towards Sterilization Disinfection.

“Using reflection to attack from more than one angle – you did think this through. Pity it still won’t be enough.”

Her fingertips stretched towards the spoons approaching towards her.

Something was pulled out.

At that moment, Guriko pulled out the spoon that was embedded in her own right eye socket and threw it towards Sterilization Disinfection with a speed incomparable to that of the other two spoons.

This spoon touched the other two mid-air.

With a crisp sound, the three all scattered.

“Tch.”

Facing the unpredictable and irregular angles, Sterilization Disinfection gave up on trying catching them all and hurriedly dodged by eyesight alone. One of the spoons scraped by her cheek and left a shallow wound, dripping with blood.

She even dodged that? What a monster.

Guriko kept her eyes guardedly on the other woman as she thought this.

“Ah.” Stretching her hand towards her cut cheek, Sterilization Disinfection said with a perplexed look on her face. “Ah, blood, it’s blood – I am wounded.”

“If you can bleed, then you can be killed.”

Guriko replied in a low voice. Sterilization Disinfection only looked towards her foe with lifeless eyes. It seemed she had not been wounded for a long time and was having trouble comprehending her present injury.

Guriko nodded and pulled out another spoon.

“You can be killed. You are no God or angel. You are a living creature, and therefore you can be killed.”

“Yes.”

The cut on her cheek regenerated instantly. Was she an Apple holder too? Guriko could not compare to her in terms of power and it was already difficult enough to wound her. If she also possessed an Apple – then how can Guriko fight against a foe like her?

The calm composure disappeared from Sterilization Disinfection’s countenance. She smiled coolly, ominously. “That is enough. You seem to be a pathogen.”

“You will have to be sterilized and disinfected,” she whispered.

No matter what, he should meet up with Guriko first.

Sakaki made his decision and started to run along the hospital corridors after he ensured his breathing and heart rate finally returned to normal. Which direction did Guriko head off in? Unfortunately, Sakaki had no idea. He only knew something malevolent was happening in this hospital. If that was the case –

“Hold on.”

Rinne’s body might also be in danger. Although she was dead, her body still remained. Even though he didn’t know the true form of his enemy – it was a powerful existence that had the ability to

completely destroy human flesh. He had to protect Rinne. If he lost her body as well, then all his hope would surely be lost.

Sakaki made up his mind and turned around, running back the way he came and headed towards Rinne's room.

He ran. He galloped. The hallway was very long. Sakaki remembered how he felt when Guriko attacked Rinne two months ago. He felt just like this. An ominous feeling crept up his chest as he all but sprinted along this endless corridor.

Two month later, he still could not protect Rinne. Was he to lose everything after all?

Sakaki ran as he endured his burning anxiety.

Why am I so powerless? I am born with the blessings of God.

He couldn't even protect one girl, couldn't even protect the person most important to him.

He soon arrived at Rinne's room, having left for about ten or fifteen minutes. However, during that time, an alien being had casually invaded the room as if it belonged here.

It was a lump of meat.

It was a humanoid lump of meat.

That monster, which looked like a conglomerate of countless earthworms entwined together, nodded slightly after shifting its giant single eye towards Sakaki. The nightmare was not over yet. After he made sure Rinne was still lying unharmed on the bed, Sakaki felt somewhat relieved. He then drew his pistol and pointed towards the Meat Doll. "Stand down! I'll kill you without hesitation if you dare to harm even one hair on milady's head!"

The Meat Doll blinked its giant eye and stood up from the iron chair it was sitting on, and said in a low voice: "Long time no see, Guryū-san."

That voice…

Sakaki recalled it. He was trained to have a photographic memory towards faces and voices, able to recall them even if he had only encountered the person once. But he could not comprehend this.

This voice belonged to…

“Itsuwara Kio.”

Sakaki murmured as he gazed at the Meat Doll.

The silent hospital was suddenly enveloped in an explosive cacophony.

Gouge, gouge, gouge, gouge gouge gouge gouge.

Gouge up, throw away.

Blood, vitreous fluid, capillary vessels, eyeballs, tears.

A roar.

Vengeance immeasurable.

The hospital had been turned into Hell.

Guriko turned and dashed out of the room when she sensed the silver mist Sterilization Disinfection sprayed, only to discover the entire hallway was occupied by lumps of meat. Meat, red with a taint of black, twirled into a whirling pile. No, these were dolls made of meat. These dolls attacked Guriko without fear or hesitation, whether according to their own will or controlled by Sterilization Disinfection.

“Get out of my face!”

Guriko scattered them with ease and pressed forward.

A single, throbbing giant eyeball was located on their head. Guriko pressed her spoon against it and gouged it out with all her strength. The eyeball bounced up and rolled away as the Meat Doll howled in pain.

As soon as she defeated one, another would appear, and another and another. Like a Shura of legends, Guriko gouged out the eyeballs of the Meat Dolls that appeared one after another.

Gouge gouge gouge gouge.

The repulsive vitreous liquid and blood flew everywhere.

Guriko's face was dirtied by the splattering blood. The pristine corridor gradually became soaked in crimson blood.

"Yes."

A sound came from right above Guriko.

Guriko shivered and looked up out of reflex.

"The Meat Dolls alone can't stop you? I did prepare a lot of them, after all. Oh well, the night is long, feel free to enjoy yourself, monster, Eyeball Gouger!"

Sterilization Disinfection was standing upside down on the ceiling.

As if she was walking on level ground, she moved easily, her long braid falling downwards with gravity. She stretched her right hand towards Guriko.

Her hand held the spray can.

That terrifying existence which killed and erased Hino.

"TYPE-A, Annihilation Mist. Come, can you handle this? This skill completely annihilated human civilization in ancient times and only spared Noah's Ark. That incident almost used up all of my power. However, only a few shards would be enough to annihilate your entire existence!"

Sterilization Disinfection shook the spray can.

Shuuuuuuu.

Guriko prepared for battle and squarely caught the fist of the Meat Doll attacking her.

Saibara Mina's voice sounded above her. "Die!"

Guriko grappled the Meat Doll and threw it towards the silver mist that was sprayed out. Seeing with her own eyes that the Meat Doll was totally destroyed, Guriko rolled on the ground to avoid the mist, thinking she would have no ways of stopping this attack.

A circle was dug out from the ground and the floor below could be clearly seen. Annihilation Mist, which consumed everything, cannot be defended against. It wouldn't be just a matter of dodging out of it.

Guriko thought this as she looked at the Meat Dolls that swarmed out around the corners of the hallway. It would be impossible to handle those things and pay attention to Sterilization Disinfection at the same time. On top of her invincible abilities, she was also physically stronger than Guriko. Facing such a powerful foe and being attacked by multiple enemies meant even Guriko may not come out as the victor.

– What should she do?

Sterilization Disinfection, who was walking along the ceiling, gazed calmly at Guriko, who was raking her brains.

“Yes, as you surmised, TYPE-A Annihilation Mist is not a quick attack. It should be possible to dodge out of it. After all, it is an ability designed for slaughter, unsuited to manage a fast single insect. Moreover, that incident with Noah almost spent all my power, making it impossible to spray continuously or over a large area.”

Guriko nodded when she heard this. It seemed that weapon was truly an insecticide, and there was not much left. That was why she had to shake the can before she used Annihilation Mist.

That would be the only way for Guriko to win.

If she can’t fire continuously, then there should be something I can do after I avoid an attack. But I can’t win against her physical abilities. If her body breaks even with mine, then at least I can –

This monster arose from the legend of the Flood, the Flood that almost annihilated all of humanity in its fallen state in a long bygone era.

Would spoons be enough to defeat such an existence?

“You don’t have the time to worry!”

The crowd of Meat Dolls approached slowly. Guriko looked at Sterilization Disinfection, who was above her, and froze momentarily.

“TYPE-B Fixation Mist. ”

Holding a spray can in each hand, Sterilization Disinfection lifted them up proudly and said, as if to herself: “This is an ability that is

only effective against individuals. There is plenty left, since there were not many chances to use it."

Then she turned the spray nozzle towards Guriko and smiled cheerfully.

"Let me tell you something. The ability of TYPE-B Fixation Mist is fixation. It solidifies anything it touches. That is all. It's not scary, right?"

It was indeed a mild ability compared to the imminently lethal Annihilation Mist. However, Sterilization Disinfection would not simply take this weapon out for fun. She must have some cunning plans in mind.

But both her hands are occupied with that. She won't be able to block my attack right now.

"You're careless, Sterilization Disinfection."

Guriko swiftly pulled out a spoon and threw it towards Sterilization Disinfection's face. Right at that moment –

Sterilization Disinfection was undisturbed as she spread her arms as if in a dance. Her right hand, which held Annihilation Mist, moved downwards while her left hand, holding Fixation Mist, moved sideways.

Annihilation Mist and Fixation Mist.

Small amounts of Annihilation Mist was sprayed out without needing to shake the can, and destroyed the spoon mid-air. At the same time, the liquid-like, dense mist of Fixation Mist pounced onto the Meat Dolls that were turning the next corner along the corridor and fixated them. The Meat Dolls were instantly frozen.

The endless row of Meat Dolls strode across their stiff brethren and approached her.

They were all bathed under the merciless mist of Fixation Mist.

"Damn it!"

Guriko realized what her enemy was planning. She wanted to run through the layer of Meat Dolls before the rest of the corridor was completely sealed off, but she didn't have the time. She had to stop

before the wall of Meat Dolls.

“This is how to corner and eradicate a small prey”.

Sterilization Disinfection’s cold voice sounded by Guriko’s ears. It was an impassive sound that held no emotions whatsoever.

“Cats seem to hunt in this manner, or they launched surprised attacks. As for dogs, they only know how to keep chasing or to surround a pray via strength in numbers. That’s not important. That’s really not important at all. However –”

Guriko hurried to use her fists to hit the wall of Meat Dolls. However, the wall of meat solidified by Fixation Mist did not so much as shiver. These fragile pieces of meat were not damaged at all. Indeed, the entire space around them seemed to have been fixated. Even worse, Guriko’s fist was stuck onto the meat wall, and she tore off a layer of skin when she finally pulled her hand back.

Blood dripped down from her hand that had its skin forcibly torn off.

If she ran the other way – no, Sterilization Disinfection was waiting there. It was a long way to the next corner of the hallway. She will definitely be hunted down as she ran.

There was nowhere to go.

What should I do? I need to think! I need to live – no, I need to avenge Rinne and Hino.

Even if I am to die, I have to accomplish that first. That is my resolve.

But –

“Will you be a nice gift for the Underworld already?”

Both mists were sprayed ruthlessly towards Guriko. The only way Guriko could see herself coming out of this would be to dodge Annihilation Mist by a hair’s width, allowing it to dig a hole on the wall behind her. However, her enemy might already have anticipated this.

Guriko swallowed. She hadn’t felt death to be so close to her for a long time.

Her Annihilation Mist will certainly destroy my entire existence, even the

Apple that kept me alive. In that case, I will really be gone from this world. This millennium – such a long life! I did not leave much behind. I did not have much happiness.

But meeting Rinne and Sasaki gave me a purpose to life.

I do not fear death. I long for it.

But death is after I killed this woman, after I found a way to resurrect Rinne. I can't die yet, not yet.

With a snap, Guriko felt something broke out of her back.

Before she realized what it was…

"Then, good night."

Murmuring, Sterilization Disinfection shook her spray cans with a rustling sound – then her abdomen and legs burst open with blood.

Sterilization Disinfection's eyes flew wide open and she fell to the ground after turning shakily around. She seemed to have fixated her feet to the ceiling with Fixation Mist and used her willpower to remove the effect. She fell onto the ground and moaned as her hand moved to cover her fresh injuries.

"Mmmm, urghhhhh!"

She still had the sensation of pain left? No, she probably deliberately retained pain. It was very empty to feel nothing at all. Life would no longer seem real. That would be a despair even more maiming to the heart than mere pain.

Blood seeped out between her fingertips as she pressed her hands against the injuries. Snatching up the opportunity, Guriko swiftly pulled out a spoon and threw it viciously towards Sterilization Disinfection, who was kneeling on the ground.

"Urrgh, urggghhh!"

Even though Sterilization Disinfection jumped away quickly and avoided the lethal blow, the spoon still sank into her shoulder. With blood dripping down from her many wounds, this woman turned to look behind her with a savage expression on her face.

"This is a private hospital owned by the Sakaki Organization."

Sakaki Guryū was standing behind her. A faint tendril of gunpowder smoke was still wafting out of the pistol in his hands.

“I ask you, what are you doing in my private property!?”

“Sakaki!”

Guriko called out to him. Though he did just save her, it had the benefit of a surprise attack. If he were to attack Sterilization Disinfection head on, Sakaki would have no chances of victory. Guriko must protect him. He was the man Rinne loved, and someone important to Guriko.

Sakaki –

Leaving Sterilization Disinfection alone to moan in pain, Guriko ran towards Sakaki. Her right eye was damaged in the previous battle, but it had regenerated enough to offer her a little of its sight back.

Therefore she saw it. A Meat Doll was standing behind Sakaki. Moreover, unbelievably, that Meat Doll was holding Rinne’s body in its hands.

Meat Doll?

Guriko pulled out a spoon and moved to attack it without hesitation.

“Move! Sakaki, that’s –”

“Stop!”

Sakaki spread out his arms and blocked Guriko. Not understanding him, Guriko looked up at his tall figure and roared threateningly: “Why? That’s an enemy! It’s her – Sterilization Disinfection’s servant! Why did you give Rinne to it? Answer me, Sakaki!”

“…”

For some reason, the Meat Doll lowered its head as if saddened by something.

Something Guriko said had wounded it.

But why? For a brief moment, Guriko definitely felt her heart throb in anguish.

“I don’t have the time to explain.”

Sakaki still held his pistol evenly and stared at Sterilization Disinfection with a severe expression on his face. The twin spray cans housing Annihilation Mist and Fixation Mist were scattered near his feet.

“This doll told me the entire story. Is she the Sterilization Disinfection who murdered milady?”

Facing Sterilization Disinfection, who was getting up shakily while pressing down on her abdomen, Sakaki put on a fierce expression that even scared Guriko. “You killed my beloved, killed milady! This sin – there is no repentance from this sin. I will kill you a million times over and over, while you lament your misfortune of having me as your opponent!”

“Hah, hah, haha, hahaha!”

Laughing softly, Sterilization Disinfection stood up straight as her knees shook. Her hand was on her abdomen, her head lowered, her feet standing apart, and she laughed in a low voiced in this strange pose.

“Hehehe, hihihi! Hahaha, ha – the world is so much fun! Honestly, how can it be so much fun? There are three kinds of existences in this world: works of art, rubbish, and things not belonging to either – the likes of you. Alright. I, Sterilization Disinfection, will acknowledge you as artistic entertainment.”

She dug out the bullets buried in her body with her bare fingers, grind them into dust and discarding them instantly. Her head was still lowered. It was impossible to read her expressions, covered as her face was by the surgical mask. Guriko felt a chilling horror.

Sterilization Disinfection maintained her pose with her arms hanging by her sides and opened her hands. The two spray can jumped up automatically and were sucked into her palms as if they were magnetic.

Drip drop. Her dripping blood dirtied the stained hallway even further.

“Hehe – hehehe, hehehehe…”

“What’s so funny?!”

Guriko couldn't help but roar at Sterilization Disinfection. She felt an ominous premonition. The situation did not improve with Sakaki's arrival. Their abilities were still vastly inferior to that of Sterilization Disinfection. But that was not all. It was an unease magnitudes greater.

"You don't seem to fully understand how to use the Fragments."

"Fragments?"

Backed by the disgusting wall of meat, Sterilization Disinfection lifted her head.

It was a joyful, happy, and extremely mischievous and evil expression.

"Alright. It's a fun fact, so I'll tell you after all. As the word would suggest, the Fragments are the Fragments of God, the millions and zillions of scattered Fragments of God. You are merely in possession of one of them. Right, I seemed to recall you referring to them as Apples?"

The Apple.

The Forbidden Fruit.

Those are Fragments of God? Now she did recall the Snake saying it was the fruit made of half of God's soul, a forbidden fruit born from God's obstinate desire towards immortality.

"Apples? Hmm, the shape is somewhat similar. It's annoying that God Mushi Emperor allowed such a mocking name to be spread. Anyways, names do not matter. Apples or not, it is funny that you have misunderstood its nature."

Sterilization Disinfection smiled as she looked towards them.

A forlorn expression suddenly surfaced on her face, as if seeking help. Why?

"A long time ago, a looooooong time ago, long before the most primeval of humans were ever born – this planet was home to a powerful existence. That existence, which deserved the title of God, was broken and scattered to the four corners of the Earth for some unknown reason."

Her words sounded similar to what the Snake said, but intriguingly also sounded like the exact opposite. In fact, the Snake's knowledge was probably passed down from its ancestors just like that of humans, full of imaginations and stories. It did not truly know the true nature of the Mushi and the Apples."

The tone with which Sterilization Disinfection spoke was full of conviction. It was concrete.

This must be the truth. The truth that had been concealed since the beginning of time. The truth regarding God, Mushi, and the Apples.

"The shattered God was broken into seven Greater Fragments and countless Lesser Fragments. I am one of the Greater Fragments. Yes, the creatures you call Mushi are also one of the Greater Fragments. However, it seems they had split up again in order to gather the Fragments."

Split up? What did that mean?

However, Sterilization Disinfection did not seem to want to explain that in detail. With a smile, she continued talking. "Do you want to know why we gather the Fragments? I'll tell you even if you don't want to know – we want to once again revert to God's original form. Our current bodies are but shattered Fragments, and we want to return to a complete being. It was an instinctive desire. Once upon a time, we had successfully collected all the scattered, innumerable Fragments."

She looked at their direction with a pair of bottomless, emotionless black irises.

"But an accident happened. Do you know about Adam and Eve? Yes, your ancestors. The ancestors who committed the Original Sin. Those two, those two slave dolls made from mud by our complete entity "God", ate vast amounts of the Fragments under the Snake's temptation. How could that have happened? Impossible! Just thinking about it still makes me upset. That was the real Original Sin. We were sleeping in exhaustion, tired from our long journey to recover all the Fragments. We never expected the guardians of Eden, Adam and Eve, given the task of safekeeping and merging the Fragments, would betray us during that time."

I understand. It is an ancient, angry light in her eyes. These are the eyes that endured eons of rage and madness. Guriko felt a chill and took a few steps backwards.

“When we woke up we discovered that, ridiculously, humans have multiplied to fill the entire Earth. We were anxious to regain the Fragments, but they were hidden in the realm of the human mind, which we cannot touch – therefore, we had to make do with the current state, attacking humans with Fragments that we happen to run into and recover them one by one. But that was not enough to regain all of them. Moreover, Tear Song and The Weakest betrayed us. Catastrophe disappeared, and we don’t know if Single Room is still alive… how demoralizing. There are only three Greater Fragments left while we’ve only collected a handful of lesser Fragments. I don’t know how many tens of thousands of years it would take for us to recollect them all.”

Sterilization Disinfection put her hand on her chest and continued with a genuine expression.

“Even so, I still want to recover to my original form. That is all – come, masters of the Original Sin, you should now have realized which side was the one that did wrong?”

“…”

Next to Guriko, who sank into a profound silence, Sakaki spoke haughtily: “I see. I get it. Fool, you were talking about breaking apart, being taken away, some raucous mess, then breaking again and taken away again. Are you done? Then I’ll kill you. According to the laws of Sakaki Guryū, you shall be executed for killing milady. Thank you for your bullshit. They meant nothing whatsoever. Shut up.”

Right. Sakaki’s basic law of existence was that ‘Usagawa Rinne is the centre of the universe’. No other rules or laws apply to him. Guriko felt ridiculous, and yet somewhat comforted at the same time.

Yes, I have nothing to do with what happened in the past.

Let’s make this simple. I must kill her to avenge Rinne. That is all.

“Aha, you’re even more foolish –”, Sterilization Disinfection gave out a beautiful smile, “than I had thought.”

A killing intent, barely concealed, was mixed in her voice. At the same time, that voice contained a cruel will that wanted to plunge everyone into despair.

“Then, at this last moment, let me tell you the power of a Fragment.”

For some reason, she was not looking at Sakaki or Guriko, but at the Meat Doll standing behind them and Rinne’s body in its arms.

“I said Fragments, right? It would be easier to comprehend if you imagine it to be a liquid. It is the shattered soul of God – a so-called soul is the life force, a force that living beings must have in order to move in the form of a living being. It is just like fuel for a car, batteries for a torch. A creature would just be a lump of flesh without the soul. The soul is present in all living beings, and we absorb more of the soul by consuming others. As the soul would be gradually spent as we live, all living beings must consume other animals or plants in order to continue living.”

In this train of thought, everything was a living organism – be it vegetables or meat. So humans were absorbing the souls of other living organisms little by little to repair the parts the soul had spent? Is that why humans would die if they do not eat?

“As the soul has a liquid nature, it can easily be absorbed by the flesh. The soul absorbed and incorporated into the body is usually stored in the heart, which plays a role as a sensory organ when it comes to the soul. Hmm, let me tell you a piece of good news. Since the soul resides in the heart, removing the heart of any human would kill them, even if the human is an Apple holder, and even if that Apple holder is me.”

Guriko couldn’t help but take in a sharp breath – *Removing the heart would permanently kill.*

Was that how she killed Rinne? All of the soul – the fuel of life – taken away at once. At the end, it seems even if you do not consent to give your soul to another, it can still be taken away so easily with force.

Now that I think about it, I have never lost my heart. I did have a close call with decapitation – and that was thanks to Sakaki. I have never lost my heart, which contains my soul. That’s probably just a piece of good luck.

Snake did not know anything about this. In order to know such things in such intimate detail – Sterilization Disinfection must be the kind of existence she claims to be.

One of the seven Greater Fragments.

Sterilization Disinfection.

Can we win against such an enemy?

“The fragments of God’s soul that you call ‘Apples’ are life force crystallizations of a potency that human souls cannot ever hope to match. Did you understand that? The soul will be spent more and more with aging. Soon, demand will exceed supply. Alternatively, sickness and injuries can also use up all of the soul, resulting in death of the organism. On the other hand, the organism will not die as long as the soul exists. It can expend some of its soul to recover from injuries. A large soul can even manage to do away with needing to consume food to obtain more of the soul. The feelings of pain, heat, and cold can all be dimmed by spending the power of the soul. At the same time, it can cause danger signals such as pain and other sensations to gradually disappear. What do you think? Did you understand it? That is the power of the Fragments. They are just huge spiritual entities, crystallizations of an enormous life force.”

That was it, Guriko thought.

The parts she did not understand were all clear now. That was the power of the Apple. Neither Guriko nor the Snake knew the truth of the Forbidden Fruit.

There was only one thought left in her.

Sterilization Disinfection will die if her heart was removed.

That was the only thing of importance. Everything else can come after that.

“There is also something else that’s very funny.” With an innocent air, Sterilization Disinfection continued: “You have seen these Meat Dolls, correct? Indeed, you have one behind you, and I have some behind me. Let me tell you how to make a Meat Doll.”

The most terrible truth was revealed.

“It’s simple. You just have to insert a Fragment into a flesh that had lost its heart. That would be enough to make the corpse into a Meat Doll, completely obedient to whoever gave it the Fragment, becoming a flesh puppet that has no will of its own. Although the life force is enough to make its limbs move like a living human, no trace of the person’s previous personality would be left in the body.

A body without its sensory organ, a body without a sense of self, it could only writhe and twitch like the spasms of a freshly killed man. However, because the Fragments retain a little bit of the person whom contacted it before, the dead body will become a doll – the doll of the previous master of the Fragment. Hehehe, you need a bit of skill to make the doll move on its own!"

Insert a Fragment – an Apple – into a dead body.

"Ah!" Guriko understood.

I can't turn my head back. I will be overwhelmed with despair if I look behind me. I understand. Not because of her words, but I understand it instinctively –

She accidentally looked back.

She barely thought about the action.

She turned her head only to confirm what she already understood.

"It takes about twenty minutes for the Fragment's power to circulate through the body." Sterilization Disinfection's voice sounded so distant. "I don't know when you gave her the Fragment, but it seems about time for her to move."

Right before Gankyū Eguriko's eyes –

Usagawa Rinne stood up with the Meat Doll's support.

"Haha, ahaha! Ahahaha, ahahahaha!"

Sterilization Disinfection's sharp laughter echoed in the corridor stained with blood and meat.

"This is the sentimental reunion, no? You did this without knowing the consequences. How foolish of you, Gankyū Eguriko! Are you happy? Your friend will never betray you now! She will die without hesitation if you tell her to die! How's that? How does it feel to make your friend your slave?!"

Usagawa Rinne's expression was empty and hollow.

She was just like a doll.

"Rinne…" Guriko muttered. Rinne twitched in response.

“Rinne.”

Then she spoke and repeated her own name over and over.

“Rinne. Rinne. Rinne. Rinne.”

Guriko instantly slumped on the ground. She couldn’t believe this. This was a nightmare. Sakaki’s face also paled. How could something so cruel have happened?!

In order to preserve Rinne’s body, they gambled and placed an Apple within her.

However, when she woke up, she was no longer Usagawa Rinne.

“Greet them, Meat Doll.”

Sterilization Disinfection moved to stand next to Rinne, grabbed her head, and tried to force Rinne to bow: “Hurry up and say ‘a pleasure to meet you. I am Gankyū Eguriko-san’s servant’!”

Rinne did not resist this humiliating treatment at all.

She only looked at Guriko with confusion.

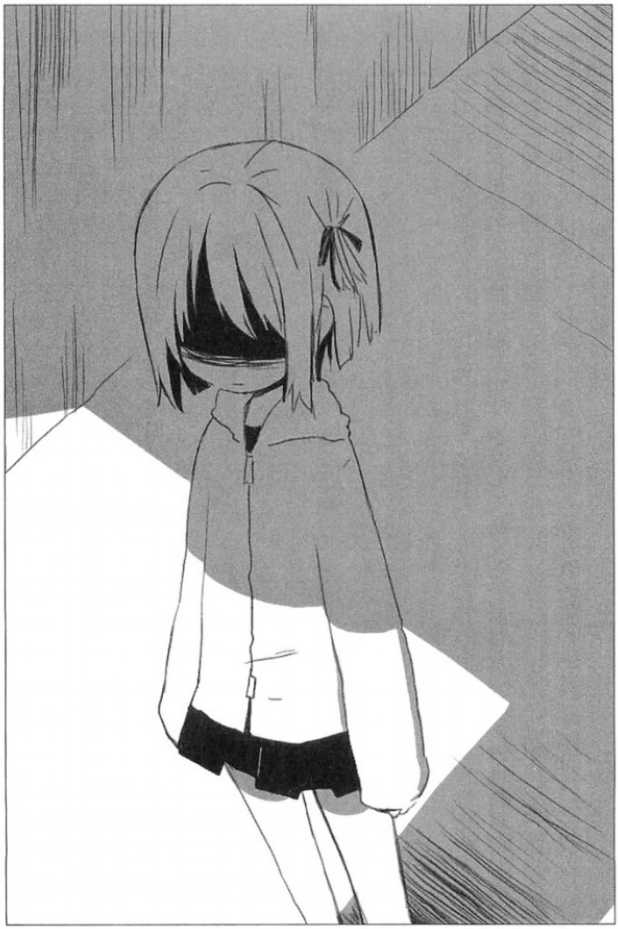
“Ah, Ah – ahhhh!”

Guriko’s anger made it impossible to think. Her mind was completely blank as she grasped a spoon and stabbed it towards Sterilization Disinfection.

I’ll find a way out if I can kill her. No… that’s impossible. But I won’t find peace if I don’t let out my hatred and despair on this woman.

“Sterilization Disinfection!”

“Why must you always make me angry?” Smiling satisfactorily, the older woman shoved Rinne aside. “If you wish for someone to die in your hatred, why don’t you kill yourself first? However, before that…”



Sterilization Disinfection turned and kicked out with the force of an iron axe.

“I will first kill you.”

Guriko’s right arm was shattered together with the spoon she was holding. Her blood splattered everywhere as her bones broke into pieces. However, Guriko continued to attack her enemy regardless of herself, an enemy next to her best friend who had been turned into a Meat Doll.

“Squelch.”

There was a sound of flesh being shredded.

“Squelch.”

No, she can’t suppress it. Her hatred eroded away her self-control. The final fragment of Guriko’s consciousness, grasping on to what was left of her humanity, reminded her that those attempts were useless.

There was a cold dark road in front of her.

It was a road that had been split in half. Two roads that were completely separate and will never cross each other.

At that time, there was a choice before Gankyū Eguriko –

Would she live as a human, or a monster?

She could only see the cruel choice the man with those lupine eyes told her.

“Ah, ah – ahhhhh –”

Instinctively, Gankyū Eguriko realized she would not be able to defeat this enemy, who murdered her best friend, without making a choice. Perhaps sensing the oddness with Guriko, Sterilization Disinfection made a leap and put some distance between them. Facing this woman, Guriko made up her mind and made the choice.

It felt like she was going to the guillotine.

If this is the only feasible way, then I will become a monster without hesitation. I have made up my mind since a long time ago anyways, even if this choice was only a form of escape.

To live like a monster.

To become a monster that can defeat the enemy in front of me.

That would be the final choice.

“Rip rip.”

Her skin tore apart and her flesh rippled as the skin on her back was ripped to pieces. As if excited, the bonds within her blood were released. This was the demon that rampaged under Guriko’s thin human skin, the monster that vanquished Snake a month before.

She originally thought she could only transform when in possession of a ripe and ancient Apple, but that did not seem like the case.

It must have been her soul that changed, and not the Apple.

My body is no longer the body of a human.

If so, then it would be impossible to live as a human.

But I am still lonely. I stuck around with Rinne and Sakaki for more than two months. That was enough – enough for this eyeball gouging monster – all that was left to do was to live and die as a monster.

When everything had ended, I will return to being a monster.

I should be the only unfortunate one.

"Oh, what's this?"

The calm smile that was on Sterilization Disinfection's countenance gradually disappeared as her eyes widened. Guriko's appearance was already changing before Sterilization Disinfection's eyes. Her limbs became elongated, her hair gleamed with a reddish light along her back, and her carapaced skin was no longer human. Long, sanguineous threads grew out from her back and wove into shapes, forming a pair of ominous, scarlet wings.

"_"

Guriko could no longer hear what Sakaki was yelling.

She was incredibly calm. There was no fear, no joy, no despair.

Sterilization Disinfection readied herself for battle and aimed her spray cans towards Guriko. "I didn't know this, I didn't know this. What is this? A mere human… no, just how long have you had an Apple for? A few hundred years? A few thousands? Is it because you continued to harbor such a great power within yourself that your body had to grow in order to endure it – no – this is not growth. This is evolution! How wonderful! You're no longer a human, but something like us –"

"Silent."

That was no longer Guriko's voice.

However, Guriko still spread her arms as if protecting Sakaki and

Rinne.

“Monsters should not imitate human speech. That would make people misunderstand! Monsters should just slaughter each other on the other side of the world. You and I are both such creatures, so we no longer need speech. You’re being loud and annoying!”

“…”

A sigh could be heard from behind the mask. Sterilization Disinfection looked at Guriko with a severe stare.

“Shhhhhh.”

“As for that, you have to let me see what choices you made, what you decided to discard, and what you obtained in return. Perhaps you are what I have always been searching for –”

“Shut up!”

Guriko snapped and rushed towards her enemy as she flapped the wings woven from intertwining threads of meat. Her body was unbelievably light and full of strength. She lifted her elbow powerfully backwards – and delivered a punch just like that.

Sterilization Disinfection’s slender body flew violently out of the corridor, punching a hole in the wall of the hospital in the process. Under the starlit night sky outside, she fell as her body dripped with blood and other unidentifiable body fluids.

“Sakaki.” Guriko did not dare to look at Rinne and Sakaki out of fear. “Please take care of Rinne. I… there was no other way… I’m sorry.”

She apologized, barely able to say those words. She ignored Sakaki’s cry and walked towards the battlefield, fleeing from this pain. She could not protect Rinne. She made Rinne into a Meat Doll. She was afraid of carrying such responsibilities. She was ashamed of herself whenever she contemplated what Sakaki must be feeling, and she could only flee.

She was afraid.

She was afraid. The world of humans was so frightful.

It was better to live in the darkness all alone. Although there was

nothing in the darkness, she would not feel pain, she would not need to think.

Therefore…

I'm sorry, Rinne, Sakaki.

– I will at least defeat her.

She descended like an angel and attacked like a devil.

The hospital gardens had verdant paths for patients to stroll in, but the blossoms in the flowerbeds were shut in the darkness. The surroundings were completely silent, and the trees were decorations only to make the dark night even more inky black. This place, illuminated only by the light of the moon and the stars, felt extremely forlorn.

Sterilization Disinfection stilled her body with Fixation Mist and reduced the speed she was falling with. She seemed able to remove Fixation Mist according to her will, and landed softly on the ground.

There was a hole through her abdomen.

This hole was about the size of a baseball. The flesh was completely taken away, and one could see through it. She moaned as her body wobbled, and she laughed softly for no apparent reason.

"Cackle, cackle cackle."

Facing Sterilization Disinfection's weak appearance, Guriko, who had completed her transformation, felt an unprecedented aura of intimidation for apparently no reason. She quickly stopped moving forward and prepared for battle.

"Yes, I am so fortunate. This power of destruction – just how much death did you come into contact with? How many screams did you bath yourself in? So beautiful, you're so beautiful, Gankyū Eguriko. That body… that soul… it has been at the same level as us for a long time – perhaps you would be the one to replace one of the vanished Greater Fragment!"

She lifted her twisted face and took up her two spray cans.

This was the monster that had once eliminated humanity.

“Hey, give it to me, give all of yourself to me. I want to be reunited, I want to be rebuilt. The depths of my bowels are crying out – I will return to my original form, gather all the Fragments, return to my perfect whole –”

She took off the lid of the spray cans and ripped away her own mask, swallowing everything within those cans without hesitation. The mist that annihilated everything and the mist that solidified everything mixed within Sterilization Disinfection’s body, and formed a new shape.

“These spray cans contain pieces of my soul. A vicious piece that would consume all, and a fetid piece that would bind all. They are like microbes that swarm the target and do their duty.”

Something suddenly started to shake. Even with her invincible body, Guriko wobbled and could not get close to her.

“I won’t dirty myself, so I won’t be affected by drinking them. Now that all of my soul has been reunited, I can use my true power to fight. Hmm – I will name this TYPE-C The End. I will use this trump card, reserved for the Last Judgement, to fight you with all my strength. Gankyū Eguriko –”

Her form began to spread.

Yes, spreading. This terrifying woman – a woman named Sterilization Disinfection – had dissolved into a cloud of vampiric mist, which drifted towards Guriko as she spoke with honey sweet words.

She was so fast.

“Do you like the night? Do you like the darkness? I love the night, love this perfect time that hides all the trash in the darkness and make them disappear. Yes, that is why I dislike humans, those who dared to stain the wonderful darkness of the night with their light. If I can return to my original form, I will certainly kill them all, not sparing even Noah. I will hunt them with the cunning of a lynx and slaughter them, leaving no one behind.”

Kill all the humans.

Even though Guriko was under the influence of her ferocious nature, the faces of those people important to her still surfaced in her mind. Sakaki, Rinne, Hino, Kio… She was unable to protect any

of them, unable to bring any of them happiness.

But I owe them.

As she was contemplating this, the mist suddenly attacked her like a feral beast. Guriko's right arm was completely erased. There was no pain, no sensation. It was simply destroyed.

It was eaten.

Guriko thought this instinctively. She dodged quickly and gritted her teeth as her other hand pressed on her wounded shoulder, which did not even bleed.

The mist once again formed Sterilization Disinfection's shape in air, and she still talked joyously in a terrifying way. "Yes, I am only the digestive organ, not skilled with battle. I am the living stomach acid that can incorporate what I eat into my body and keep expanding. Did you understand that? If I don't stop me now, I will expand endlessly until I destroy the world!"

That was the legend of Noah's Ark, the Great Flood. The Bible recorded that the Flood, swarming like a living darkness, soon swallowed the entire world and slaughtered all living creatures, erasing all cultures without leaving a trace.

The world was completely enveloped in the emptiness, as if in a deep night.

The disappeared right arm did not regrow. It seemed to be completely eaten. Guriko didn't regret losing her arm – but she was in real trouble now. If she punched Sterilization Disinfection, her arm would be erased. That ability was the other woman's invincible spear and shield at the same time.

This was Sterilization Disinfection.

If those things called the seven Greater Fragments can be compared to the Seven Sins of Christendom, she must be Gluttony, the digestive organ that would not be satisfied even if she had consumed all.

"Struggle on, little worm! Spacing out will get you squashed!"

She had no chance of victory. She couldn't think of a way, but she could not stop here. *This is Sterilization Disinfection, someone who*

killed Rinne, killed Hino, ate the most important people I have in the world… How can I let her escape?

Moreover, this monstrous body was screaming for battle.

Guriko flapped her wings powerfully to return that call.

I don't know what I can do with this body. In fact, this is only the fourth time I've transformed. The first and second times were when I obtained new Apples from my late traveling companions. I had gained Apples that had ripened viciously throughout the ages, and my body could not control this power and allowed it to erupt. The third time was when I fought Snake a month ago.

I only spent a very short time as this monster every time. Although I don't know what I can do, I have to do my best. The only thing I know is –

– My body is a storm.

Let it explode at will.

The gluttonous mist swung towards Guriko, swift as a sword. Guriko managed to dodge at the last minute, flapping her wings viciously.

In that brief time, a torrential storm erupted out of her wings.

"Urgh?"

Sterilization Disinfection was blown apart and, for a brief moment, was scattered into the night. This was indeed a powerful attack. However… she could only blow her enemy apart, but couldn't kill her. After numerous aimless attempts with her wings, Guriko gradually learnt how to control the wind.

This was the only attack that could be used on Sterilization Disinfection. She didn't know what else she could do with this body. *Think. Think of a way to defeat her.*

"I see. However, this is a weak strategy."

Sterilization Disinfection said this calmly as she attacked again.

Guriko flapped her crimson wings in order to descend, and she saw it then.

The mist had separated. She could see at least four clouds. Even if she could use her wings to scatter them, she would not be able to disperse all the mist at once.

Guriko dodged the remaining few clouds of Sterilization Disinfection, stirring up a storm and scattering them in the dark night.

But that was useless. Even though she could scatter the mist, it did not damage her opponent. She was only creating more weapons for her foe.

“What’s wrong? Is it over? Die then! I will savor your heart, the Fragment that is your soul, like a true delicacy. Teehee, I’m so happy! My heart is pounding with anticipation. Yes… I should have done that from the beginning. I shouldn’t have kept the Fragments at one place; I should just have eaten it all up. Eat up Tear Song, Catastrophe, The Weakest, Single Room, Unpleasant Counter-Current, and God Mushi Emperor. If I eat them all –”

Her honey-like sweet voice murmured those words with pride.

“– Wouldn’t I become the perfect existence?”

Guriko felt a chill as she heard this.

She was the digestive organ that single-mindedly wished to become the perfect being. If she dissolved and absorbed everything, then perhaps she can become such an existence. However, once she reached such a perfection, she would be wandering alone for an eternity. Maybe that was her true wish? Did she not say that – ?

There was a woman called Saibara Mina.

She died, satisfied and alone, in her perfect world.

This was only another beginning for her. That woman, Saibara Mina, must be this Sterilization Disinfection. But that was the odd thing. She said Saibara Mina was already dead, but she was still alive. She was not one of the seven Greater Fragment from the beginning of time, but a human who simply happened to receive that specific Fragment.

But now she is a monster – Guriko thought about this pointless fact.

Then she is the same as me – Guriko continued to think about this

meaningless information.

I will fall into an existence like hers in the future. However, I want to at least spare this world that Sakaki and Rinne live in.

Gankyū Eguriko thought this as she looked at Sterilization Disinfection.

She had lost count of how many times she had approached the other woman. Guriko used her wings to blow her apart, while her body was in turn wounded by the sections of the mist that escaped her storm. This one-sided attack continued on and on.

Wounded, Guriko noticed some shadows moving towards this battlefield, which was lethal just by approaching.

That was Sakaki and the Meat Doll. Did they leave Rinne somewhere? They seemed to have arrived here by following Guriko and Sterilization Disinfection, who had fallen down into the garden.

Damn, Guriko thought.

This is my fight. If I involve Sakaki like this and cause him to be killed, like how Rinne and Hino were killed, then that would be the end. I won't ever pay it up to Rinne.

"Oho –" The mist once again gathered into one. Sterilization Disinfection frowned with displeasure. "What a bother."

"Guriko." Sakaki did not pay any attention to her and muttered to Guriko, who had her back to him. "I couldn't say this a month ago. No matter what you turn into, you are who you are. You are Guriko, someone milady liked, someone I like. Don't leave me. Don't let me lose someone important again!"

"Sakaki…"

Guriko murmured as tears swelled up in her eyes. How shameful that this monstrous body still shed tears like a human. But she was happy. Sakaki's words seeped into her heart, a heart that was full of the intent to kill.

However, Guriko still shook her head. *It was too late. I have already made my decision in the cruel choice the separated my future into two separate possibilities.*

“You are all the same, idiot. You’re so weak, so what are you doing here, being careless and all? Someone as useless as you, someone without any abilities, should just be good and stay far away. I’m going to gouge out your eyeballs if you bother me too much. Honestly, please don’t be like this. Urgggghhhh –”

After having mumbled her complaints, Gankyū Eguriko looked up at the night sky tiredly and sobbed.

“Don’t be too gentle with me. Don’t say kind things to me. If people hate me, then I at least don’t want to feel this regret. I won’t be able to leave, and I will end up losing everything again. As long as I have nothing, I will lose nothing. I’ve had enough of losing everything…”

“Guriko.”

There was a small sound. Who was there? It was a familiar sound. Guriko turned and looked over her shoulder and saw a Meat Doll. It was the servant of Sterilization Disinfection, whom Guriko had more or less defeated. No. She suddenly had another thought. A repulsive, unbearable thought.

This voice belonged to –

“Kio…?”

No, no…

Could it be? From the very beginning –

The Meat Doll nodded with a lonely expression. “Do you understand it now? Guriko… I am sorry. Itsuwara Hino and Itsuwara Kio were dead. More accurately, we encountered Sterilization Disinfection when we were strolling on the street on the night after we first met you. She killed us, gave us Apples, and made us into Meat Dolls.”

It was all to take away my Apple. Once they have an opportunity, such as what happened today with Hino fainting, they plan to take away my Apple through coercion, right? Alternatively, they can take out my heart while I was asleep. It was an effective strategy –

But I can’t believe this. I don’t want to believe this.

Was all their love an act? Was everything fake? Was it a temporary

sentiment put on show only because of Sterilization Disinfection's command and in order to obtain Guriko's trust? What was that about? That had better not be a joke!

Kio – no, the Meat Doll who was once Kio lowered its head apologetically.

"We obeyed Sterilization Disinfection's orders from then on. I pretended to work at my job, while Kio pretended to be a housewife. We pretended to be your parents. But you have to believe me, we really do love you. Even though it might have been a fake sentiment that came about because of our orders –"

"…"

Guriko shook her head and bit her teeth silently.

I remember it now. How did Hino die? She could not betray me even at the end. She died because she disobeyed Sterilization Disinfection's command. She died protecting me.

When she remembered this, Guriko gave a glare at Sterilization Disinfection, who was still smiling in glee. Guriko then said: "Dad."

As if confirming something, Guriko said briskly: "I had a life where there was Dad and Mom, where I went to school, where I had Rinne, where I went to Sakaki's lessons and talked about pointless things. I like that life even though I won't be going back to it again. Dad –"

She stretched out her arms and stood there as if protecting them.

" – I feel rather happy to be your daughter."

It didn't matter that he is a Meat Doll. I am a monster myself, and yet I stayed beside them, concealing that fact. We're all the same. Right now, I don't feel that they betrayed me or feel sad about it. Besides, they had plenty of chances to take away my soul, but they couldn't bring themselves to kill me.

"Aha, how unfortunate. I thought you would kill that doll in anger."

Sterilization Disinfection, who was watching at the side, laughed dryly.

Then she scattered in the blink of an eye and became the mist

capable of consuming all.

“Then let us stop this cheap soap opera. Mmm… since you three like each other so much, I’ll eat all of you at once. You can be mixed up within my body and be together for ever and ever!”

Guriko got ready for battle and Sakaki also lifted his pistol.

However, the Meat Doll was silent as if contemplating something.

And then, unbelievably –

“Guriko.”

“Squelch.” The Meat Doll stabbed its hand into its own chest and dug out its own heart. Guriko widened her eyes in horror. *What is he doing – if he does this, if he does this to himself…!*

“Use this Fragment. This power will more or less contribute to defeating her.”

“Kio… you idiot!”

As she screamed, Kio wobbled and could no longer retain his shape. Unlike Rinne, whose corpse was almost unmarred, Kio seemed like a Meat Doll born out of minced meat. He would lose his human shape once he loses his Apple. Therefore –

“Kio! Don’t be so rash! Put the Apple back!”

“No, Guriko.”

His voice was already coarse beyond recognition, but that voice was indeed Kio’s. It was the voice of that good father, that man whom Guriko considered silly, innocent, energetic, and foolish at the same time.

Even a monster seemed to be able to cry. Guriko cried as she hugged Kio, who was losing his human form. She wanted to put his heart back in, but she didn’t know how. He had no mouth. She couldn’t feed it back to him. However, just placing it back into his chest didn’t work either.

“I am… a Meat Doll serving Sterilization Disinfection. I don’t know when I will lose my mind and attack you. It’s best for me to disappear… A corpse should return to the earth. I am… going to where Hino is…”

Once he said this, the man named Itsuwara Kio, who was thoroughly toyed with by fate, broke into pieces.

“Ahh…”

Guriko stood at the spot, dazed, holding Kio’s heart in her hand. *Someone died again. Again, I couldn’t protect him. Again, he died. That’s why… that’s why I hate living. Everyone is dead. They all died. I made everyone unfortunate. I hurt everyone.*

“That man is next.” She heard to cold sound.

Sakaki.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

Guriko roared loudly and bit down on Kio’s heart. The scent of blood. The scent of her father’s heart. So disgusting, disgusting, disgusting. But she chewed, swallowed, and absorbed it.

An overwhelming power instantly poured into her.

Obtaining a second Apple revigorated Guriko’s soul, which had exhausted itself in order to maintain this form. Not only was it revigorated, it was even strengthened. Blood dripped from Guriko’s mouth, as if she was a fallen angel –

She took Sakaki into her arms and leapt through the mist. Kio’s Apple won’t last forever. She had to think of a way to kill Sterilization Disinfection. *I no longer want anything else. I just want to kill her. Rinne, Hino, Kio…*

Guriko used her wings to blow away the mist with a storm, keeping her distance with her.

Due to her elongated torso, Guriko was about as tall as Sakaki and holding him in her arms was an easy feat. Lying in Guriko’s arms, Sakaki quietly said: “Guriko, listen to me.”

Guriko knew this was the severe tone he used at school to teach the important stuff. She paid attention to him instinctively. As if it was the easiest thing in the world, Sakaki said: “As you cannot damage her by scattering her around, you should condense her back into her original form. Guriko – you are really stupid. You have such a power, but you have no idea how to use it. You get a zero out of a hundred. Are you sure you are Sakaki Guryū’s student?”

“Ahhh…”

Guriko drew in a sharp breath, but she also suddenly understood what she must do upon hearing those words.

Yes. It was easy. It was so easy to defeat Sterilization Disinfection.

“How bothersome. A teacher should just watch quietly as his pupil wins.”

She said this with irritation as she looked at Sterilization Disinfection, who continued to spread out.

“Is it over? You’ve used up all your strategies? You can’t fight back anymore? You’ve given up? Let me see your face! Let me see your twisted expression! Let Sterilization Disinfection see your face twisted with the pain of defeat!”

“The one who would be having a twisting expression –”

Still holding Sakaki, Guriko forcibly flapped her crimson wings. The surrounding trees snapped one after another and the verdant garden was ruined by the storm. The wind twisted. Not holding back at all, Guriko used the Apple that Kio entrusted to her to its fullest extent and dealt her final blow.

The crazed wind formed a tornado, circling around the gluttonous mist that almost swallowed Guriko moments before. It was silent. For a brief moment, the world was silent. The air was stilled. The heart of the tornado had formed. Suddenly –

“– is you, Sterilization Disinfection!”

Guriko dexterously vibrated her wings. For a brief second, she channeled the power of her Apple by manipulating the surrounding air, sending a compact and violent blast of wind into the center of the tornado.

“Ah?!”

The other woman screamed wordlessly, perhaps realizing Guriko’s intent. But it was too late. She was already caught. Since she could be blown apart by the wind, it meant she can also be pressed down by the wind. Then Guriko will just increase air pressure in all directions and force the other woman to be immobile. She increased the air pressure, forcing the ball of air containing Sterilization

Disinfection into the center, solidifying the spreading mist that was Sterilization Disinfection.

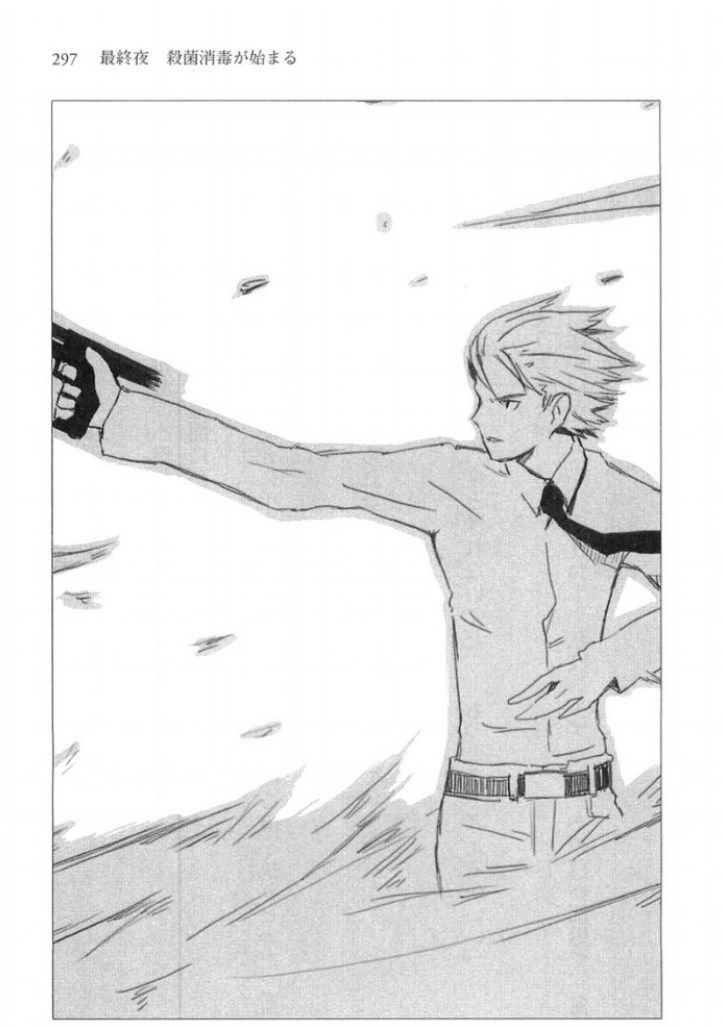
Yes. Since she could be spread, she can be compressed.

Once compressed, those minute particles would group into one block. In fact, under the constant air pressure, Sterilization Disinfection condensed into her original form for a brief moment.

“Damn –”

When she realized it, it was already too late.

“Sakaki, fire!”



As Guriko screamed, Sakaki fired his bullet.

The bullet, shot with an almost supersonic speed, approached Sterilization Disinfection, who hastily tried to changed back into a mist –

And it penetrated her heart that housed her soul, going through the entire storm.

But that was not all. Guriko unleashed a torrent of air and dashed towards Sterilization Disinfection, who was falling towards the ground.

“Die, Sterilization Disinfection.”

Guriko’s hand pierced the other woman’s chest, which was already shot through by the bullet, and mercilessly dug out her heart. Blood splattered everywhere as Sterilization Disinfection emitted her final, dying lament.

“Huh?”

Holding her trembling, bloodstained hands in front of her, the expression on her face was one of incomprehension.

“Huh. This can’t be!”

“Is that going to be your last words? You won’t be able to talk again – you better think about what you want to say.”

“That’s true.” It was a slightly sarcastic and yet calm voice. “Am I not good enough to achieve perfection? That… I… I always stayed inside that white room, hoping to lose certain things, and single-mindedly seeking the perfect emptiness.”

She smiled at the end.

“Ahh. I see. Upon death, everything will disappear in perfection. Hehe.”

Those were the final words of the monster, who killed Usagawa Rinne, who controlled the Itsuwaras, who changed an entire hospital into a scene from hell. Those were the final words of this woman, who almost annihilated all of humanity in the primordial era, who was named Sterilization Disinfection.

She was certainly dead.

“… We won.”

Gankyū Egoriko said those surreal words.

Her crimson wings sank back into her back and her completely transformed body returned to its original shape as she reassured herself. The only signs that remained were her removed right arm, and the blood that Sterilization Disinfection had spilled and stained Guriko red from head to toe.

Killing this woman would not change the world. This was still a cruel, ordinary night. Lost, Guriko hugged Sakaki, who was also relieved, and continued to cry.

They defeated the villain, but who was saved?

The night was ripe. The dawn was still far off.

Close: BloodStained Night

Sixteen-year-old Nagumo Ame was a student in Kannonsakazaki Private High School class 1-B. She was well-behaved, quiet, wasn't particularly afraid of strangers and often listened to others speak while giggling. She was about average in terms of studies and athletics and didn't have any particularly noteworthy traits. She was like the air that floated in and out of the classroom; people frequently overlooked her existence.

What made her special was —

“Hehe.”

She will force out a laugh even though things weren’t particularly funny.

“Haha.”

Ame-chan laughed awkwardly as she walked with her friends. Five or six uniformed students walking together in a group wasn’t particularly rare. In this inconspicuous group, Ame-chan’s existence seemed even less solid as she listened to her classmates talk, looking happy.

“I heard Sakaki-sensei disappeared.”

“Usagawa-san also disappeared, right? Whoa, doesn’t that sound like they eloped? After all, it’s *that* teacher. Feels like we’d say ‘they finally did it’.”

“But Gankyū‘s gone, too.”

“Oh, Gankyū, have any of you ever talked to her? I’m way too scared, I just don’t dare to get close to her.”

“Ah. Yeah, that happens. But she’s actually pretty normal, just a bit strange.”

“After all, it’s the legendary transfer student.”

Ahaha, a fit of laughter.

It had been about three days since Sakaki Guryū, Usagawa Rinne, and Gankyū Eguriko suddenly disappeared. For the ever-diligent Rinne to miss school with no reason, and furthermore for Sakaki and Guriko to also be skipping was truly too strange, so the teachers also felt perplexed. But the school’s teachers were all like Sakaki’s servants, so the chaos probably resulted from the master’s disappearance.

“Hehe.”

Ame chuckled a bit, and without letting her nonsense-spewing friends notice anything weird, said:

“The hospital.”

Just a noun, and the friends surrounding her probably didn’t even

know who said it. Even so, those girls who loved to gossip were influenced by the word, and started chatting.

“Right, right, it also seems that something terrible happened at the hospital —”

“Ah, that thing where all the patients at the hospital disappeared? I don’t know know too much about it.”

“My mom also disappeared.”

“Ah, sorry, Nagisa-chan.”

“It’s fine.”

“But they disappeared at the same time as Sakaki-sensei? Maybe Sakaki-sensei went to the hospital too, and then some kidnapper took him away. Aren’t there weird rumors?”

“What do you mean, some kind of ridiculous kidnapper. Would that be you?”

“Miku, you’re really stupid, I like it.”

“Thanks, wait… do you want to be smacked?”

“Sorry.”

“Please don’t hit me using an idiot’s strength.”

“Weird rumors.”

Suddenly, a voice redirected the conversation back on topic. While laughing “Hehe”, Ame-chan stealthy added to the girls’ conversation.

The girl always called “Idiot” by her friends had a satisfied and accomplished look on her face.

“That’s true. After the disappearence incident, there have been all sorts of weird rumors circulating in the hospital. I heard that if you’re walking near the hospital you can hear a woman moaning — Though no one knows who it is.”

“You… where’d you hear something like that?”

“Miku, your info’s always interesting. Well, let’s not worry about

that. Is that it? I'd like some more details."

"Eh? Nagisa-chan's interesting in this kind of weird talk?"

"That's not it, I just thought I might find some clues about my mom."

"Sorry, Nagisa-chan."

"It's fine."

"Let's get back on topic, Kae, you pressed too many buttons you shouldn't have."

"Basically, it's a weird rumor, but there's actually only this much. The location should be behind the hospital. Well, the hospital's sealed off now, so we can't go."

"You tried to go?"

"Miku's really an idiot."

"Because she cares about stuff like this. Well, it seems that there've been a lot of annoying things lately — there was Long-Armed Demon, and there was this incident, ah, how annoying… Eh? Where's Ame-chan?"

A girl looked all around her, but could find no trace of Nagumo Ame.

"Did she go back? I don't know where Nagumo-san lives."

"She should have told us before she left."

"Then again, Ame-chan's sort of like… how should I say it, it's like it's comforting just to have her there."

"Sort of like those 'My lucky doll' things?"

"I'm the lucky one! Me, me I tell ya!"

"Shut up, stupid Miku."

Confirming it was behind the hospital was enough. The next part was simple. There was no need to wait for nightfall. The policeman guarding it were human, and the people working in the hospital were likely the Sakaki Organization's men, there only to handle the

aftermath. There, the back of the building, which was not involved in the incident, should be empty.

After going up the mountain behind the hospital and climbing up the tallest tree there, the hospital that had been the site of the battle two days earlier could be seen. There were about six people working outside — thankfully, none of them were behind the building, and the rest of the workers were probably inside.

Behind the building, there was an easily traversible road, and the person who heard the female voice was probably walking through there. Nagumo Ame considered where she would assault the area. Since people passed on that road, it would be dangerous.

It was not like being seen would be inconvenient; it was just that she wanted to do things peacefully if possible.

“Let’s fly.”

Ame-chan muttered to herself, and jumped from the top of the tree without hesitation. She instantly grew dragon wings, which pierced through her uniform. Gliding high up in the air, she wasn’t seen by anyone as she landed behind the hospital, and then her wings retracted back into her body.

“It’s been so long since I last flew, mmm, that went pretty smoothly.”

She talked to herself and looked around her. The Sakaki Organization’s men and the police weren’t exactly idiots; they should have investigated this place, though normal people wouldn’t be able to see any strange beings. They would only be able to hear things. It was an extremely feeble, seemingly imaginary sound.

After the incident, Nagumo Ame checked whether Sakaki Guryū, Usagawa Rinne, and Gankyū Eguriko were alive or dead.

The three of them had brought some random belongings and were living in Usagawa Rinne’s apartment.

Then — in this hospital that became a graveyard, the thing that remained and cried in anguish was —

Ame-chan checked with her special, monstrous vision that could detect things not part of this world.

Blood, a large amount of blood.

It was spilled all over the hospital's outer wall and it seeped through the ground, leaving dark traces on the earth.

In the middle of it all was a woman who crawled on the ground and groaned in pain.

"Sterilization Disinfection."

Hearing that voice, the woman abruptly looked across.

Her skin and pristine hair were dirtied with mud and blood. Possibly having trouble breathing, she did not even wear her mask. This woman, who had blood spilling out of her chest and was sweating constantly, was called Sterilization Disinfection.

She looked at Ame-chan as if asking, "You can see me?" Laughingly, Ame-chan said, "So the largest Fragment in your heart was pierced. The sensory organ is damaged and the soul is collapsing — In fact, you already can't use power on the level of the seven Great Fragments. Hehe, but… before that you still took away Usagawa Rinne's soul. However, at that point your heart — the sensory organ — was already filled, so you had no choice but to construct a new sensory organ somewhere else. You managed to stay alive because you hid a Fragment — That's right, isn't it? But the emergency vessel had a serious rejection reaction, right?"

Ame-chan talked without pause, and then sneered. Mina gritted her teeth with an incomprehensible expression, staring the other woman's smile that seemed to say, "This is it for you?"

She probably wanted to hide here for a while, and wait for her body to restore to a level suitable for the sensory organ. However —

Everything ends today. It's unfortunate that I found you.

"Heeheeheehee," Ame-chan laughed.

"Who are you?"

Sterilization Disinfection struggled to squeeze out these words.

Smiling, Ame placed her hand on her face.

"You don't know? Sterilization Disinfection, you've become weak. I'd heard that you used up all your power in that incident with

Noah, but you can't even recognize me? What, if you're down to this level then there won't be a need to be cautious. I won't need to run off to antagonize Gankyū Eguriko. Whatever, I only just realized that." Her hand moved down and her eyes, nose, mouth, and eyebrows all disappeared. Sterilization Disinfection stiffened. Ame, who did not have a mouth, laughed joyfully, "Heehee. Right, it's me, not anyone else, it's me."

"The Weakest — You traitor…"

She stood up with bloodshot eyes, and glared at Ame-chan while her body shook. This body could fight no longer. That should have be clearer to Sterilization Disinfection than to anyone else.

Even so, she absolutely must kill The Weakest.

"I thought it was annoying, since only your Annihilation Mist and Single Room are dangerous to me. Therefore, I will kill both of you to become truly invincible, an untarnished, strongest shield."

Ame-chan stretched out her arms, and said with happiness from the bottom of her heart: "And then I will rule this world. It's idiotic to have an existence like this but not putting that goal first. Hey, my sister, won't you die for me? Since it's so painful, just let yourself dissolve and die! You'll never be able to restore to the complete being anyways. It's useless. Isn't it meaningless to preserve such a life?"

"What kind of joke is this!?"

Sterilization Disinfection clenched her fists, and even though she had already lost the ability to form her spray cay, she still slowly reached her arms down.

How pitiful — The Weakest laughed, and her spread out arms —

Took the form of giant sickles.

"You also regret it, right? Because if you die here, you won't be able to see my wonderful new world."

"Stop pretending to be God, you blemish!"

That word —

Was one she frequently used to mock herself with in the past.

Ame-chan sneered, and used her sickle arms to cut her down.

Neat and swift.

Saibara Mina's head flew.

Because Sakaki refused to trust the moving company, and instead chose to inconspicuously move into Rinne's home, Guriko helped out until it was dark.

Deep in the night when even the plants slept. Guriko carefully avoided making noise as she exited Rinne's room.

She carried no bags.

She had no destination.

She just felt she couldn't stay at this place.

That was the choice the man with wolf-like eyes had forcefully pointed out to her before her fight with Sterilization Disinfection. To live as a human, or to live as a monster? She who chose to live as a human, received nothing but painful defeat.

That was enough.

That was enough, Guriko thought.

"Sakaki's protecting Rinne's body, so I'm not needed here."

Letting her wolf-like hair that could never blend into the the night flutter in the air, the single-armed girl wearing black looked back at the apartment.

She had lived with Rinne for almost two months here. Along with the laughter and happiness, there were also things from a thousand years ago that she should have forgotten.

Shining brightly, and ever so lovable, I liked her.

So, Rinne.

I must return her kindness.

Even if this body is broken to pieces.

Throwing off her reluctance to leave, Guriko turned her back to the building with her head lowered. The right arm that was completely annihilated by Sterilization Disinfection could not be returned even with an Apple's power. For all her numerous years — those maddeningly long years — she had lived using both her arms, and with only one left she could not balance herself well.

Rinne and Sakaki were the same. Now, without Rinne, if she stayed here she didn't think she could live properly.

She might as well be alone; she should just live in the darkness without causing problems for others.

"Are you trying to become a monster again?"

Gazing at the uneven road's surface, Guriko felt something cold in the back of her head. Was it a gun?

Her intuition told her that, and she silently nodded without turning around.

"Then, for the safety of humans like me, I need to kill the monster before it is released."

The voice held killing intent, and that gun was definitely loaded.

Standing behind her was Sakaki Guryū. *No problem* — Guriko coldly smiled.

"Shoot if you want, kill if you want. Sakaki, that's actually what I want."

Guriko lowered her head, looking at her remaining single arm.

"I've killed a lot of people, and I've taken so much, so much that this single life can't take enough punishment. Will you free me from that burden? Are you that kind of a man?"

He did not respond to the question.

There was already nothing more to say.

So Guriko closed her eyes and said something insignificant.

"You've gotten good at hiding your presence. Compared to when I first met you, you're completely unrecognizable. Have you been constantly working hard? You must have always been like this. It's

not some prodigious talent, or some inherited gene, just constant hard work that got you to your strength today. You… will definitely become stronger, much stronger than me."

"I—"

Finally, a response.

That voice was filled with sorrow. For that superhuman, such a weak voice was exceedingly rare.

"Am very weak."

"Yup, you're really weak. Even though you'll become strong, you're still weak right now. I'm also very weak, so I couldn't protect Rinne."

Guriko naturally turned her head, and the gun that had not moved was pointed at her forehead. Stars danced in the night sky. Sakaki, in front of her, was covered in hazy shadow while insect cries could be clearly heard from all directions.

She merely looked Sakaki straight in the eyes.

"So Sakaki, become strong! Help me protect Rinne."

Guriko reached into her pocket, and took out a beautiful spoon for Sakaki to see. It was an expensive, rare spoon that Hino and Kio had bought for her. This piece of decorated cutlery only reflected the aura of night, dark and faint.

"Hino and Kio — " She looked at the spoon, and continued, "Maybe they were actually Sterilization Disinfection's Meat Dolls, maybe their real personalities had already completely disintegrated, but they didn't kill me and they even saved me that time. Plus, Kio and Hino both turned back into humans as they were dying. There must be more secrets to the Meat Dolls. Perhaps Rinne will return to how she was before, becoming the Rinne that we love."

The moon that was previously covered by clouds appeared and lit up Sakaki's expression. It was one that majestically shined with spirit, without the slightest weakness.

"I want to search for a way."

She gripped her spoon, and said to Sakaki's face, "Sakaki, you said

that to me in the hospital, didn't you? You gave hope to the me, who had given up on everything, didn't you? Rinne hasn't died yet, so, Sakaki, help me protect her. Though I don't know how long it will take, I will find a way to return Rinne to how she was without doubt and then come back."

To return Rinne to how she was before.

To bring back the everyday life that Long-Armed Demon and Sterilization Disinfection destroyed.

"And then, let's go to school together, the three of us."

This was Guriko's resolution. At first she only wanted to escape from this human world with nothing but pain, but now it was different. During the fight with Sterilization Disinfection, Sakaki had embraced her, and then she felt with even greater conviction that she did not wish to separate from them.

So, for the sake of returning to that period of happiness, Guriko would go on a journey. She wouldn't completely revert into a monster. She only needed to search for a way to recover Rinne by herself.

That was something that definitely could not be achieved while staying here to protect Rinne. She would need to go to the outside world, or rather into an even darker world where Mushi and monsters swarmed in order to find it.

Before she met Rinne, that had been Guriko's world.

Just a return to her life two months ago. There would be a day when she would definitely meet Rinne and Sakaki again.

"Creak," the door opened.

Rinne stood there. She who had become a Meat Doll, yet her eyes twinkled with firm determination. She sped over to Sakaki, who was pointing a gun at Guriko.

"You can't."

Naive and innocent, it was a voice like that of a young child.

"Fight."

That appearance of hers, that expression as she spoke seriously for

some reason.

Sakaki and Guriko simultaneously loosened up, and their expressions became gentle.

“I apologize. Aah, milady, do not worry, we weren’t fighting.”

“Right. This guy pointed a gun at me all on his own. It’s not a fight, it’s a one-sided assault.”

“You can’t, sensei.”

Rinne truly believed that. With hands at her waist and her chest stuck out, her face completely was serious as she stared at Sakaki. There was a time when she made that expression whenever Guriko and Sakaki fought. Right, since it was like this, definitely —

“You must get along well!”

After making a slightly angry face, she should scrunch her eyebrows. And, not knowing what to do, she should return to a kind, tender face.

Seeing her like this, Sakaki couldn’t hold back his tears. A tear flew down the cheek of his handsome face.

Guriko forced out an exaggerated laugh, “Haha, Sakaki you idiot, you still cry at that age. How shameful.”

“What? Huh, why am I crying? And Guriko.”

Sakaki looked over with a face of incredulity, and said in a low voice, “Why are you also crying?”

Guriko brought up her hand to feel her cheek, and noticed that there was a warm liquid. Tears, these were — tears. As she realized that, she felt that she couldn’t stop —

Guriko silently wept, and then cried out in frustration. Sakaki was quiet, yet it seemed that his tears could not stop either, and he continued to incredulously tilt his head.

In a rather remote place in Japan, there was a town called Kannonsakazaki. In it lived a girl called Usagawa Rinne. That girl didn’t really stand out in anything; normal people like her could be found anywhere, and she just happened to be decent at cooking.

Yet she completely changed the standardized life of Sakaki.

She saved a monster who had been swallowed by darkness for a millennium.

Even though she became a Meat Doll, Rinne would never change. She would still look hurt whenever Sakaki and Guriko argued with each other, with an expression showing that she hated seeing their tears.

Rinne calmly pulled the two next to her, embracing them. She was extremely weak, and she didn't feel real compared to before, but Sakaki and Guriko couldn't resist as they were pulled to her thin body.

"Don't worry."

Rinne quietly spoke. "Don't worry. Don't worry."

She was also crying as she said that. And so, the three cried together, feeling each others' warmth under the dark, frigid night.

One was the heir to an enormous corporation, a man who had always walked on a predetermined route.

One could not find a place to call home, a girl who had thrown herself into the sea.

One gouged out eyeballs, a girl who lived in the darkness as a monster.

The three met by chance, definitely only by chance. In this world, where God had broken into fragments, perhaps miracles had long ceased to exist.

But Sakaki pledged to always protect Rinne.

Guriko would search for a way to recover Rinne.

And Rinne would embrace the two of them like this.

So there was no need to worry. Rinne's words were right. Though she didn't have anything to base it on, Guriko felt she didn't have to worry.

The night was about to end, and they needed to wake from this nightmare. Because after experiencing the blackest, darkest,

desperation, people should be able to hope for a happier future..

Author's Notes

Hello, everyone. I'm Akira.

This book is the sequel to the MF Literary Awards "Best Newcomer", "Mushi, Eyeball, and a Teddy Bear". It's Akira's tenth work.

It's different from the two series I published with different publishers. I completely didn't expect to write a sequel to "Mushi, Eyeball, and a Teddy Bear". Ugh. Just as I was caught up in being satisfied thinking, "I already finished the book", the editor acted all natural while saying, "What? What are you babbling about, Akira-san. You're not gonna stop and leave all the problems unresolved, are you?"

Eek!

Since I was lectured like that, I had to read it again, and bits of foreshadowing appeared one after another.

Yeah, the first volume had foreshadowing-like things scattered all over the place. And of course, since I intended to finish after one volume, I had no idea where to go with it. So I gathered all those parts that seemed like foreshadowing, and slowly thought it over.

"Ahaha! I got it! Akira knows where this series is gonna go!"

"No, Akira-san, that sounds really stupid to other people."

"Editor-san…"

"Alright alright."

"Please allow me to write Volume 2…"

And so, "Mushi, Eyeball, and Sterile Disinfection" was born. This story really wasn't what I wanted to do.

How is this story gonna end? On that point, I have no clue. But, I believe it will definitely turn into a confusing, weird work.

Ahh. I look forward to it.

Next is acknowledgements.

No matter how weird this book is, he had no intentions of stopping me. He only urged Akira with “How about this!”, making ever crueler descriptions. Executive Editor Kindaichi-san, you’re an accomplice! The first victim of working under someone with this kind of vile personality, illustrator Mitsuki Mouse-sensei, it is thanks to you that this series hasn’t been abandoned by MF Compilation J! Thank you so much! And finally, the readers who read up to here! Next time I’ll write a more salvageable story! Please don’t give up on me! Ahh, I’m out of pages, so basically, thank you everyone!

Akira

Translator's Notes and References

Long-Armed Demon: Literally, Te-naga-oni （手長鬼）. Long-armed Ghost/Demon. Return to Text

Black Dragon: Kuroki Tatsue's full name is written as 黒木竜衣 in kanji. The first characters of her surname and first name make the word 黒竜, literally meaning 'Black Dragon'. That is how she likes to refer to herself as. Return to Text

-tan: -tan is a baby-talk style rendition of the usual -chan. Return to Text

Itsuwara: The first kanji in this surname means 'Fake'. Return to Text

Shichi-Go-San: A Japanese childhood ceremony. For more information please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shichi-Go-San. Return to Text

Saibara Mina: The name is written as 殺原美名, with the first kanji 'Sai'殺 means 'to kill'. Return to Text

Nageki Kurukiyo: The name is written as 嘆木狂清 in kanji. '嘆' means 'to sigh', while '狂' stands for 'madness'. The author didn't forget to poke fun at Guriko's own 'savage' name while at it. Return to Text

Zekiguchi Nashinori: The name is written as 藉口無法 in kanji. The Kanji for Nashinori '無法' means 'lawless'. Return to Text

Tatami size: A 'tatami size' is a Japanese way of measuring the size of a room based on the standard length of a tatami. For more information see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatami. Return to Text

GeGeGe no Kitaro: An old manga/anime series by Shigeru Mizuki. For more information see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GeGeGe_no_Kitaro. Return to Text

Nagumo Ame: The name, "Na-gumo Ame", means "Rain without Cloud" ie. Sun shower. Return to Text

Credits

Mushi, Eyeball and Sterilization Disinfection
Mushi to Medama #2

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Translations: Baka-Tsuki.

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Contents were fetched from the translation group's site on 2015.12.12.